Practical Medicine

Myshu

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Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
1. The Matron
2. The Cold
3. Foot Rubs
4. Thunder's Fever
5. The Ribbon
6. Random Encounters
7. The Bath
8. Self Esteem
9. Alcohol and Tail
10. Pillow Talk
11. Memory Lane
12. Missing Half
13. Paradise
14. Flying

Summary

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Description:

Zidane, Freya, and how to learn nothing the hard way. Warning: swearing and sexual content.

1. The Matron

"I am not a healer, Zidane Tribal—hold still."

White mages were sometimes called "emergency relief."

"Ah-ahh! W-wait a second."

White magic was renowned for the ability to heal any ailment or trauma short of death (sometimes skirting even that), defying all advances in chemical medicine with a few enchantments, a wink and a prayer.

"Do you want me to fix this or are you going to flounder around all night? I'm about to set your shoulder whether you're ready or not."

However, curative magic, like all other spells that augmented the body, had only temporary effects. A strong Cura could last several hours before receding and leaving its patient to fight recent aches and wounds anew. The magic was best used to seal lacerations and set bones while more permanent remedies were sought.

"Okay! Okay. Don't hold back."

He insisted against potions; he wanted to save them. He said he had a feeling they were going to need every last one before their confrontation with Kuja was fulfilled. He wouldn't share that slight doubt with anyone but her, though; he also wanted to save the group's morale.

She said he was being senselessly stubborn, proud and vain, but respected his wishes.

One foot braced against the small of his back, Freya wrenched his right arm into its proper socket with an alarming crack.

"*Mother of fffff—*" Zidane spit a string of curses into his blanket that would've turned Prince Puck's ears red.

They had been on the road together for some time now, each one of the headstrong party of eight looking for their own reason to stop a madman from crimes he'd already committed. Freya supposed that ultimately, this was what they called revenge.

They had been following a lead back to the Blue Narciss that would hopefully unearth Kuja's hideout in the deserts to the east. In the meantime, they camped just clear of the peaked woods that shrouded the Black Mage Village, the twin moons bright and

steady over their four little tents. Eiko and Dagger, Quina and Vivi, Amarant by himself and Steiner left alone—or vice versa, depending on which mistrusted the other more by the time the sun had set.

And Freya stayed with Zidane. The Dragon Knight wished this was the first and last night she'd be stuck nursing her obstinate comrade's injuries, but it was hardly either case.

It started one of many nights like this ago, she remembered. They were all eating around the campfire when he ribbed her with some lewd joke about sharing a tent, something usually directed at the princess and hotly thwarted by her bodyguard. If Freya hadn't caught the insistent glance between the lines, she would've throttled Zidane right there and wrapped up the evening early.

Instead, after the others had retired, she indulged his poor humor and followed him to bed.

"I didn't want to bother anyone else with this," he admitted then, and she was at once flattered and annoyed that he chose to bother *her*,of all candidates. He complimented her powers of discretion, saying she'd appreciate a secret. Then he rolled up one pant leg to show a livid, swollen ankle

wrapped in a blood-soaked sock and asked, “You wouldn’t happen to have something for serpion venom, would you?”

Once she figured out his scheme, she nearly strangled him anyway.

Earlier that day, one of their recurring encounters with monsters bought him a nasty souvenir. Instead of treating it sensibly and immediately, Zidane accepted a quick, unaccounted Cure from Eiko and walked on the injury the rest of the day, comfortably numb—until after dark, when the spell wore off, of course.

Freya berated him on several counts: for letting his guard down around a sand scorpion, for trying to hide the sting, for trying to walk it off, and then for getting away with all of the above without suspicion. She cursed his feckless machismo seven different ways while obliging his need for medicine, and then kept her honorable word on it the next morning. Nobody else knew better.

The next time, it was a dragonfly bite. It became a parade of exotic bruises and scrapes, each blow brashly taken in Dagger’s or Eiko’s or Vivi’s stead, and sometimes even hers. A Cura always brought him back to his feet and ready to go, and while

Dagger gently thanked and reprimanded him at once, saying that next time he might not be that lucky, Freya would privately frown. She knew that "next time" was going to be *that night*, which neither princess nor budding summoner seemed to realize.

"You're lucky I remember a few things from the shamans during my training to become a dragon knight," Freya lectured while her patient caught his breath, "Or I'd just sic Eiko on you and be done with all this."

"Urmgh," Zidane groaned appreciatively, face still buried in the blanket.

"You were reckless. You threw yourself right on top of that zaghnol!"

The boy tentatively rolled over and tested his throbbing joints while Freya rifled through her purse.

"It could have stomped you to death," she peevishly concluded, withdrawing a vial of wiltgrass balm.

Zidane sat up and scratched the back of his neck. "Not if I'm on top of it…" he remarked offhand, wincing at the puddle of drool he'd left behind.

She pushed him back down, evoking a clipped cry. “Your smart mouth won’t spare you this time. Now pull up your shirt and let me look at those bruises. We’re not done yet.”

“Yes ma’am…” he drew out a bitter grumble as he complied. “Geez, someone’s crabby tonight. You sound like my mother.”

“You could’ve used a mother!” Freya snipped. Whimpers escaped like hiccups as she padded cold balm over his purple ribs, and he squirmed on his belly like a fish. “She might have taught you some sense—not like that band of vagabonds that brought you up.”

“Hey, no dissin’ the gang,” Zidane mildly objected, aware that nothing was going to stop his friend’s tirade at this point.

Freya sniffed a flustered note. “I just worry about you. You can’t keep pulling crazy stunts like that.”

“Eiko was in danger,” he mumbled evasively into his arms.

“Eiko was fine. She’s a perfectly capable white mage and a summoner, to boot. Fenrir wouldn’t let anything get within six feet of hurting her.”

“Tha’s bullshit and you know it.”

“Maybe,” Freya relented, “But she still has plenty of experience getting out of harm’s way.”

“Wa’n’t fast enough.”

“Never mind that Amarant already had his poison claws in the zaghnol’s flank?”

“Wasn’t gonna let’er get hurt.”

“And look who ended up hurt.”

“Not gonna let’er get hurt.”

“You’re certainly lucky Dagger doesn’t see you like this. Poor girl has enough to fret over.”

“Not gonna let anyone get hurt,” he said as forcefully as he could without the great outdoors overhearing.

Freya wasn’t daunted. “We can fend for ourselves, you know. You don’t have to be our human shield; it’s ridiculous. You think you’re going to be a hero, but you’re just playing the fool. And at this rate you’ll be a dead fool. I’d almost say you don’t trust us.”

“I trust you guys!” he squawked, finally offended.

“Then have a little faith in our abilities!” Freya argued.

“I do! I just…” Zidane faltered, “I just couldn’t take it if something happened to one of you guys and I coulda… you know? I don’t want to…” He swallowed and closed his misty eyes, finishing frailly, “I just want to protect my friends.”

The Burmecian hesitated, then mellowed, her hand going easy on his side and then gradually pulling away. She put a lid on the balm, wiped off the pads of her fingers with a rag, packed up her stray things and then spread smooth her half of the “bed.” Zidane lay cemented in place, not moved in any sense until he felt a hand gingerly brush his hair off his cheek. His eyes cracked open and found Freya peering over him, a puzzling, maternal look traced along her muzzle and up her brow.

“You’re just a kid,” she whispered, the moniker not so patronizing from her lips as it usually is from Blank’s or the boss’s—or even Steiner’s (just once, and Zidane fed him his rusty helmet for never again.) “You don’t have to grow up so fast.”

He melted, confounded by her again, and dug his gaze into the ground, unable to face her pity with his guilt—for hiding, for lying, for bringing his pain to her doorstep—for all the pain he couldn't hide or steal away from everyone else's. "But we do," he murmured. "We all do."

She only pursed her lips into a deeper frown, tucked the blanket around his shoulders and patted him on the head like some invalid dog. "Get some rest. You'll be as good as new in the morning."

So he would be. He always bounced right back, like a cat. And he'd need all the vigor, because she knew tomorrow would have still more monsters to fight. She knew as well that when it got down to the line in the heat of battle, her little lecture would fly straight out the window. She couldn't stop him as much as he couldn't help it; it was his nature. It was going to take a lot more than strong words to teach him how to count on his friends the way they counted on him.

Until then, she would be his matronly shaman, night after bruised and bloody night.

She knew, because they'd had this talk countless nights before.

Their battle was over for now, though. Nothing left to say, Zidane shifted under the blanket, granting a little space for Freya to settle in. She snuffed out the miniature oil lamp and slipped into the warm pocket, pressing her back snugly to his.

They sighed some silent treaty and let sleep roll in, no gratitude anywhere save the fuzzy tail coiled softly around Freya’s leg.

2. The Cold

The Lost Continent was *bloody* cold.

Kuja's tracks had disappeared somewhere around the mountains, and Eiko with them.

So there they were, trekking around the base of a dead volcano, its ashes long overwritten by snow. After an exhausting hike across the tundra they reached a brown oasis, a pocket of trees warm with dying amidst the barren plains. The party burrowed so deeply into the copse that the icy gales couldn't touch their campfire, and there they stayed for the night.

Snug in her tent, Freya was trying to remember the last time she had one to herself. Not to depreciate her esteemed travelling companions, but after spending a long, stressful day with them, a small respite was in order. The privacy was courtesy of both Eiko's absence and Amarant's inclination to sleep outside, arctic conditions be damned. The burly bounty hunter had a stubborn streak as thick as his hide, so Freya spared him her concern and lent it all to Eiko.

The poor girl, lost in Kuja's clutches. He was just going to step on her eidolons on his personal ladder to power, and Freya and the others could only hope that they caught up with the villain before Kuja disposed of the child-summoner the same way he did everything that exhausted his use.

No, Freya assured herself, her stomach hardening around the word, *Kuja would not have his way.* She wasn't going to let him hurt anyone anymore.

She leaned back from her thoughts and snorted. A certain someone's suicidal heroism must have been rubbing off on her. She didn't need to waste precious rest on worry, anyway. Her blanket was thick, her pillow firm and her belly warm with a potion—a cozy bunk on the Blue Narciss it wasn't, but gaining the feeling back in her frozen toes was luxury enough.

She was drifting between dreams when the flap of her tent rustled suspiciously.

"Psst."

That was the wind, her chilled brain resolved, and she sighed back into oblivion.

"Psst. F-Freya. Come oooon Freya, wake up. G-God damn, it's f-freezing out here," the wind

persisted.

Grumbling fiercely, she kicked out of the covers, leaned forward and snapped back the flimsy door. Right outside appeared Zidane, on this hands and knees in the dirt like a stranded mutt.

“U-Um,” he introduced, quaking in spurts, “This is gonna s-sound a little crazy…”

“From you, it always does,” Freya curtly remarked, already resenting the frigid air intruding on her nice, cozy tent. Once her sight adjusted to the moon-dusted campsite, she couldn’t help but notice that her friend was clad only in his undershorts.

She blinked numbly. “…Where are your clothes?”

“Y-Yeah…” he responded slowly, “It’s a-about that.”

After he didn’t elaborate, Freya shook herself awake and hustled him inside. “Oh get in here and out of the cold already, you imbecile.”

Zidane immediately dove for the blankets, turning twice in place as he wrapped up. Sitting in a tight knot to one side of the tent, only a blonde tuft and long tail poking out of the blanket, he looked

like a sahagin in hiding. His fluffy appendage coiled once around him and then knotted into itself.

“Unbelievable,” Freya huffed as she reclaimed the other blanket. “What happened? Why did you wake me up? You still haven’t told me *where* in the world your clothes went.”

“They’re back by my tent, laying out to dry,” the blanket spoke.

“And… why?” Freya prodded him.

The pile of wool shifted until Zidane’s face reappeared. “You know that pond over there, where we got our water from?”

“Yes…” she answered warily.

“Well, I got up to take a piss—”

“This is already more than I wanted to know.”

“—and I kinda slipped on the rocks and, uh, fell in.”

She stared hard at him. “You fell in the pond.”

“Ye-e-e-eah.” He shook all over for emphasis. “Kinda got soaked. I did as much as I could, but,

y’know. Pants probably won’t be dry until morning.”

“And this is my problem, how?”

She almost swore she saw him *blush* through the darkness. “Well, um, I was wondering, if, uh, you wouldn’t mind if we, maybe… Can I sleep with you? Pleeease? You’re warm.”

“Oh, for the love of Reis.” Freya gruffly turned her back, flopped onto her pillow and tucked herself in.

“Is that a no?” Zidane squeaked.

Freya let him stew for a minute, seriously considering resuming her privacy, until she relented. She slapped the mat beside her with her whip-like tail. “Come on.”

“Yeeeeah thank you thank you thank you,” he quietly sang as he wiggled into place.

She gave him a minute to get comfortable before she wondered, “Why me?”

“Hrm?”

“Why do you always come to me with these things?”

“Do I really have to explain?”

“Indulge me.”

She could feel a slight tug on the blankets as Zidane sat up on his elbow. “Well, let’s see. I’d bother Vivi, except he already has enough trouble getting to sleep and—no offense to him—he’s a nine-year-old Black Mage, neither of which can help me. He also kinda smells like old pork left in a fireplace—don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

Freya opened her mouth, trying to look for *something* in that sentence to chastise him for, but he continued without her.

“I’d go to Quina if I wasn’t afraid of getting eaten in my sleep, and I’d sooner wipe my butt with one of his-her-and-or-its *crusty old sporks* than wake Rusty up for *anything*, including and perhaps especially the entire forest burning down all around us.”

She clamped a hand over her muzzle, sniggering something terrible.

“Even if Eiko *was* here, I’d rather not give her any more wrong ideas than she already *has;* Amarant would sooner *throw me back into the water* than look twice at me, and it’s probably going to be

a really long time before Dagger lets me in the sack, so you're all I've got left."

It was the best Freya could to maintain a healthy deadpan. "I am deeply, deeply flattered, Zidane Tribal."

"Any time," he said cheerfully, falling back into place behind her.

"Mmm-hmm. Go to sleep."

"Plus," he added belatedly, 'You're warm and fuzzy. And don't snore.' He teasingly nuzzled her shoulder blade. His cold nose mingled with warm breath to give her goosebumps. "And you smell like pears, did you know that?"

She chuckled despite herself. "I said go to sleep!"

"Pears that fell in the mud."

"If you don't shut up I'm going to beat you."

"And got eaten by a wet dog."

She reached over, grabbed her purse and pummelled him with it. He rolled through the blows, laughing. "Hehehe—ow ow—hehe—ow—hehehe—ow holy crap woman—ow—hehe—what do you keep in—ow—there—ow—rocks?"

“You are going to *behave* if you’re going to keep sharing a bed with me,” she stopped the assault long enough to warn him.

“Yes’m, I surrender,” he agreed playfully enough, and Freya packed the blunt weapon away.

“Really though,” he whispered once she settled back down, “I appreciate the way you’ve put up with me. I know I’m a royal pain-in-the-butt.”

She closed her eyes and huffed in good humor, “To say the least.”

“Heh. Maybe Dagger will someday say that about me, if ya know what I mean.”

“You’re a scoundrel. Go to sleep.”

Thus they lay together, staying warm and thawing out, respectively—he wasn’t kidding about freezing, she noticed. Eventually Zidane’s shivering breath grew placid like slumber, and she let herself relax. One of these nights, the dragon knight lamented, they were going to have a nice camping trip—no sand scorpion stings, no dislocated shoulders, no Kuja and no wet pants.

Freya bolted upright with a furious epiphany.

“Wait a second, you were going to—” she sputtered. “In that pond? Where we *got our drinking water*?”

3. Foot Rubs

It was a mistodon, one of dozens they'd encountered before. Or maybe it was hundreds. It could be a thousand, for all she's been counting. It mattered less by the day how many were reduced to dust, for they seemed as endless as the droplets of Mist from which they spawned.

Simply keeping the road clear of monsters was like trying to fight the Mist itself, futile to a maddening degree. Crawling mistodons, screeching dragon carcasses, gore-tusked sheep that pounced in packs and devoured like wolves—all of the world's abominations were starting to run together as one ghastly parade, carpeting the continents in fresh undeath.

It was another of those giant, spiky, zombie tree slugs. It was one false step, an amateur slip—mere inches either way would've spared all the pain, hassle and humiliation. A mistodon's ichor makes a rank lubricant, she learned incidentally.

Freya cursed the careless landing the rest of the day, and not only because she sprained a perfectly good ankle and put a mastered technique to shame

(what good was a dragon knight that didn't know how to nail a jump?) Eiko's healing spell was generous and the rest of the party graciously moved on without remark, but she knew that the worst was waiting for nightfall.

So it was hours later that she spent supper brooding over the possibilities. While the others chatted around the fire, their revelry making light of the dangers of camping, she was bracing herself for the inevitable. It was only a matter of *how* and when —the what, and why and who wasn't even up for question. Somebody was going to try to "rub it in."

It turned out to be more of a literal rubbing than she expected.

As soon as the night fell thick and she was nearly dreaming, he rose to sniff about the sleeping camp like a muu rummaging through garbage. He stalked into her tent, sat down at her feet, lifted her swollen ankle out of the blankets and set it in his lap. The silken bracer was stripped away and two firm hands sank in, diligent fingers rolling over and under her heel like a balmy tide. No excuses—taking no permission and giving no demand, he simply waltzed in and stole the initiative.

Why that boorish, presumptuous, sneaky little monkey, he was so…! What gave him the right to barge into her tent unannounced? Perhaps in all their time on the road they'd grown too familiar with each other, but that didn't justify anything. He should still ask, warn her—something! What if she was indecent? What if she wanted to be left alone? What if she had other company (of course she didn't, and he knew she didn't, but it was rather the principle of it.) She was about to make a noise over his impertinence, but the interjection fizzled out with a lazy sigh. She could hate him, but something about that was too easy. She was above that. Maybe they both were.

Maybe it was simply that, at the end of the day, she couldn't turn down a good foot rub.

Of all the schemes she imagined, a foot massage was at the bottom of the list; it hadn't even glanced her mind. Yet there she was, on her back in the cozy dark, tight-lipped as she let that boy have his way. As much as she might actually appreciate it, if anyone else happened to witness this pampering, it would be the end of her, Freya thought. She took too much pride in her warrior's fortitude to stand the likes of—say, Amarant sniggering, *'Poor little rat hurt her foot?'* because that's just the kind of thing

he *would* say and—oh! The picture of his gloating burned her up.

It was bad enough dealing with Zidane. Just because those hearty thief-hands were going easy on her didn't mean he wasn't relishing the petty irony. Moon-blue and campfire-red trickled through the creases of the tent and traced his features with sinister shadows. He had a thoughtful gleam to his eye that always forecasted something devious, and rarely did he let a bad idea stay in his head where it belonged.

"Well well well, let's see, where to begin…" he drawled wickedly, thumbs dragging along the arch of her foot. She had to bite back her pleasure in time to snip, "By shutting up."

He ignored her, naturally. "Ah! I remember." His posture grew strict, one finger wagging at her in a farce. "You were reckless, Freya Crescent. You threw yourself right on top of that mistodon."

She tensed at the patronizingly familiar line, a snarl tipping her muzzle. "Oh, you are NOT…"

"You could have seriously hurt yourself."

"You are a *jerk*—"

He draped an arm over his head, feigning airy distress. “Or even been killed! I just don’t know what to do with you.”

“If you don’t shut your awful trap…”

“It’s almost as if you don’t have faith in our abilities,” he sighed, following through the act. Freya lifted her other leg and stabbed a clawed foot straight into his melodrama. “You cheeky, obnoxious little son-of-a-gun!”

He leaned back to dodge the kick, a ruddy grin cracking his composure. “Haha! Such strong language from the Lady Freya. How unbecoming of you.”

Fed up with his smart mouth, she lunged at him, her leg catching in the blanket and twisting an awful way. “I am going to kill—eeaaah!” She flopped onto her side, drawing her knees up to her chest and cradling her throbbing ankle.

Zidane bounced back from the failed swipe and leaned over her. “Ahahaha, oh geez, did you seriously just hurt yourself?” he chortled, almost succeeding at sounding concerned instead of amused. “Take it easy, momma-rat.”

She hissed, the recurring pain burning as hotly as a fresh wound. She could hate him, but… “I hate you.”

His tone mellowed, though that stupid grin lingered. “Aww, I’m just messin’ with you, you know that. I’ll stop, seriously. Gimme your foot back.”

“…”…But it’s easier said than done. Zidane took her silence for acquiescence and reclaimed her leg. He started again, playing her sore sinews and toes like a flute, and she closed her eyes and buried her face in her blanket. Embarrassing… but it felt too good to resist, every ache melting away at the soft touch. It was completely opiating. Why, how could he be so…?

“There. That better? Not so bad, huh?”

At least she still had the wits to grunt, “Hrmph. This doesn’t even make us close to even, you know.”

“Heheheh,” he simply chuckled, not even his contrary nature denying it. They ran out of things to say and the harmony of the night settled in, too peaceful for words. He sat snugly, petting her foot like a cat in his lap, and she lay drowsing in her

blankets. She would have paid real gil for him to rub her foot all night, though at the rate she was falling asleep, that would hardly be necessary.

Freya was somewhere between relaxed and sedated when a timid voice broke the spell. “Hello?”

The more alert of the two sat up straight, his hands neatly retreating to his sides. “Vivi?”

A pair of lantern-eyes peeked through the flap of the tent, a cautious tint to their steady orange glow. “Can I come in?”

Freya rustled herself awake. “Of course.”

The child mage shuffled through the opening, his hat dusting the flimsy roof and slipping over his hidden nose. It took him a clumsy while to get situated in the suddenly cramped tent.

“Hey, what’s up? Can’t sleep?” Zidane asked, one note louder than a whisper.

“Oh…” He made a tiny, ashamed noise as a hesitant shadow stooped over his brow. “I had a bad dream.”

Freya lent him a compassionate frown. “You poor thing.”

“Did you wanna talk about it?”

Vivi considered it before shaking his head lowly, like a mule. “No…”

“Oh. Well hey, wanna stay with us? Always room for one more, eh?” Zidane offered, pleasantly tactless. Freya had a mind to pinch him, but one look at the boy in his rumpled clothes and floppy hat warmed her heart, as it always did. Nobody could say no to Vivi; he never asked for much. She spread out the extra blanket and the boys got comfortable, Vivi gratefully taking a place on the other end.

“So, what’re you guys doing up?” he asked innocently.

Zidane blinked. “Uh…” When he checked his other side, Freya speared him with a threatening look. *Don’t you dare sell me out; I kept all of YOUR stupid secrets.* “Nothing! Just talking about where we’re going tomorrow, right Freya?”

He passed her a cheesy wink and she pursed her lips in a scowl, not amused. “…Yes.”

“Oh.” Vivi didn’t even question it. He wiggled under his corner of blanket, the little lights in his inky face dimming with a yawn. “M’kay. G’night everyone.”

Zidane patted his shoulder. “G’night. No more bad dreams, okay? Or I might have to scare them away… like this!”

“Oh no!” Vivi squeaked, too late. The older boy sucked him into a squirming hug, tickling his side fiercely and growling like a pigeon caught in a cat’s jaws. Vivi thrashed feebly under the ridiculous assault. “Ack, hehehehe! Help!”

Freya picked up her coat and beat them over their heads, like putting out a fire. “All right, *children*. Let’s get some rest.”

“Yes *mother*,” Zidane batted back, and with a playful flick of his tail he released the little mage. Both settled down, splaying over the ground and between the blankets. Freya assured enough cover for herself and then joined them.

Silly children… She could never feel like a mother. Never old enough, never strong or wise enough… It was a job that took more faith than she had. She couldn’t relate to anything now. Ages it has been since she felt like a child, herself.

Not since *him*…

One last lamenting look outside was all it took for the lulling solace of Gaia’s good moon to sweep

her away.

Something felt… strange. Strangely close, strangely warm, almost stifling.

Who… where…?

Zidane awoke in a tangle of cloth, hair and limbs. He spent a groggy minute orienting himself—sorting the blanket from his legs, his hand from another glove, his tail from someone else's and his hair from the swath of fur resting heavily across him.

Freya…?

Once he figured it out, he froze. The Burmecian had him in a half-hearted, sleep-drugged embrace, one arm around his shoulder and his head tucked under her chin. If he looked a few inches lower, he'd be right in the cradle of her bosom. Her blouse had one too many buttons undone, too, so it wouldn't be a tough show to catch.

Wow. This was a little awkward. He wondered what to do, and whether it would be safer to simply do nothing and go back to sleep, as if nothing was wrong. His tail reached around his back, feeling out

—yep, Vivi was still there, and even better—one of the arms slung across Zidane's middle belonged to him. Huh, wasn't he popular tonight? A stranger sandwich he couldn't concoct in his weirdest dreams.

He could make a bawdy gag out of the whole predicament if not for the little guy. He didn't want to spoil Vivi's much-needed rest, all the same. Maybe if he lay still and begged for sleep, everything would pass into morning, no problem.

…Wait, one problem, as the reason he woke up in the first place grew achingly clear: he was on his side, and the ground was putting cold, unyielding pressure on his joints. If he didn't switch sides or roll over or something, he was going to be hurting like a rickety old man for breakfast. It was a funny shame—he was never embarrassed by his odd figure (until Baku made him put on dresses for the "pretty parts" in plays), but between the extra appendage and his girlishly wide hips, it was sometimes difficult to get a good night's sleep. He recalled an old quarrel with his bunkmate Blank, back when they used to share the Prima Vista's homely cabins.

"Quit hoggin' all the pillows, kid."
'I need 'em!'

“You’re using them for everythin’ but your head, *geez.”*
“Neh! Can’t get comfy without ’em.”
‘Can’t you just lie down like a normal person?’
“My tail’ll fall asleep!”
“Phbt, so? Sleep on your stomach, then.”
‘I’ll get a crick in my neck!’
“That’s it, gimme the damn pillows, you freaking pansy.”
“Hey! Not without a fight!”

He cursed his bones and shifted his weight from one leg to the other with painstaking care, trying to avoid detection and not sit on his own tail (which would just be moving from one uncomfortable position to another.) By his thieves’ grace he succeeded, and relaxed a bit for one problem settled.

He was just getting the feeling back in his thighs when the next problem began to escalate. Freya stirred, one hand rooting in his ribs and squeezing gently. He felt the tips of her claws poking through his linen shirt and gasped, fretting at the possibility that he’d woken her, after all. What was he going to say? Was she going to be angry? Was this even his *fault*?

He sensed a buried twitch, just above his brow, somewhere in the fuzzy cords of her neck. Her lips quivered, muttering, “…hrmle……ther… gn.”

What?

“…ver… eave… u…”

His tail ticked, bemused. She *was* still sleeping. It must be some dream, to animate her like so. He thought he could glean the meaning of it if he listened carefully enough, though the next word provided all the evidence he needed.

“Mmm… Fratley…”

Ah, geez. Did she think HE was…? The way her hand dipped into his side and urged him closer confirmed it. Yep, this was *really* awkward. Kinda funny, really. It would make a heck of a story for the others, if she wouldn’t flay him for sharing it.

He repressed a wry chuckle. If he had been in this spot three years ago, when they first met, he definitely would’ve taken advantage of it. Their lives were a lot less complicated then…

Of course, the night would’ve ended with a big red handprint across his face, but he liked to imagine it worth it.

He again contemplated waking her. It was just a harmless dream—for now, at least. He could almost sympathize. During their last stay at an inn, he had a very nice dream about Dagger interrupted when Quina thought s/he heard croaking under the floorboards. She'd be annoyed as well, though on the other hand, she'd be positively livid if he let things go too far.

Trying to remember his last good dream brought a vexed frown—why couldn't this kind of thing happen with Dagger? Then again, he wouldn't want to take advantage of her… That was the last thing he wanted, despite his advances (and how much it would infuriate Rusty, to steal away his precious princess.) She was better than that, and deserved better.

…So did Freya. It was a pity that the closest she could get to the man of her dreams was… well, in her dreams. Even when they finally reunited, at long last… Zidane wanted to hit him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted to knock someone's teeth out that bad—before Kuja showed up, that is. And surely the man couldn't be at fault for *amnesia*, but the moment he saw Freya crumple to her knees, laughter broken like frog song, and that man just *stood there*… He was lucky Vivi was in the

way, because not even the damn King of Burmecia could've saved him.

Unfortunately for them both, Freya was just getting started. Sleepy caresses grew more earnest, one hand pulling up his shirt while the other slid under his belt, dangerously ticklish. Her thumb circled the subtle ridge of his hip and he drew a taut breath, hoping the cool air would slake his suddenly hot blood. Zidane swallowed, nervous now, and so did she, an odd, luxurious purr issuing from her throat. Quite unexpected, for a… well, rat. Vagrant fingertips roamed the small of his back, exciting the little hairs at the base of his tail, and he bit his tongue. If she kept at this rate, he was gonna get…

Velvet arms closed insistently around him, pressing him into her belly with an alluring murmur. He could feel the heat thrumming in her chest, the eager edge to her breath and the swimming sensation in the pit of his stomach and knew he was in trouble now, for sure. Just as he was plotting the best way to break it up without disturbing Vivi, he felt something grazing through his hair—something warm and rough and *wet*…

Was she *licking* him??

“What the hell…?” he mouthed, the next best thing to bursting into laughter. Each stroke of the tongue was tender and thorough, like being kissed by a deer. Was this a standard display of affection for her race or what? The image of Burmecians going after each other like salt-licks in bed was enough to send him into convulsions, but he was wedged between hysterics and arousal, her mouth comically grooming and her hand teasing the underside of his tail, the touch so sweet he choked on a mewl.

The perverse humor and pleasure was making him sick—he couldn’t take it anymore. If he didn’t crack, he was going to break. He braced his arms against hers and pushed, hard. “Freya!!”

One solid jostle was enough. She shuddered, eyes snapping open, and matched his utterly bewildered stare. His skin was throbbing, his breath was clipped and his face was flushed, and he prayed she couldn’t tell through the dark.

“Hey, you’re… all over me,” he explained lamely.

She gaped at him, her hair parting before her eyes like a curtain of silver. Dream-fogged aquamarine crystallized with a damning awareness of where her

hands were and what reality was lying beneath, and for a dazed half-second she seemed more ferociously beautiful than he ever noticed before.

Still, they didn't move—they couldn't, and the most agonizing second in the world passed before Zidane did the first thing he could think of to break the ice: he laughed. It was a bubbly, crazy snicker that built up to a loud, stupid caw, and Freya cringed in outrage. With a disgusted and tired "hrmph!" she grabbed her portion of blanket and spun around, shutting him out.

The bundle of clothes behind him shifted, accompanied by a dopey voice. "What's going on?"

So much for not waking everyone. "Nothing," Zidane asserted, remarkably calm. "Go back to sleep."

"Okay…" Vivi did, agreeably as that.

Zidane rolled aside, free at last, though it took an extra minute to quell his madness. He glanced to his left and found Vivi unmoving in slumber—he'd never met a more trusting kid. He checked Freya again, though her backside was an unflinching wall, refusing to meet him. She was probably mad at him now, but better for being insensitive than for being

too sensitive. He wasn’t put out with a foot up his rump, after all, so she couldn’t be that upset.

He folded his arms behind his head and waited for sleep to cool him off, a quirky smirk stuck on his face.

Yep, that was pretty funny.

Eiko had a giggle-fit that morning. When she asked how he got a cowlick, he laughed and said a rat must’ve gotten to him.

4. Thunder's Fever

A/N: Recommended reading for this chapter: CrimsonCobweb's "Fur Beneath Her Fingertips," from which this scenario is based (with permission.) It is a delicious fic, especially for ZxD fans, so stop right now and go read it. Then come back and read this. Thanks Crimson!

The trip across the plains had been particularly arduous that day: gloomy rain, mud, sticky grass and persistent monsters flooded their path, and sometimes their own blood mixed with the zaghnols' and griffins'. Steiner had a grimy linen bandage around his elbow to attest to that.

In the evening the sky finally broke, steely clouds burning away like embers in the sunset, and in the respite the party decided to start a campfire and cook a hearty meal to lift their spirits.

Eiko sat Steiner down to change his bandage (the stalwart knight declined any "unnecessary fuss" at first, but even he was overwhelmed by the imperious little summoner.) Zidane stalked away to patrol the

area (he had been keeping to himself all evening, which was strange for the vivacious boy, but given the long day no one blamed him.) Garnet was already gone, having volunteered to wash laundry at a nearby stream, and Quina had bounded off to accompany her, leaving Freya to tend to the meat that Amarant laid at her feet in big, sloppy chops, his clawed arms dipped to the hilt in butcher's ink ("*Bon appetite*, rat," he announced with the most amicable sneer she'd ever seen.)

Vivi helped start the fire and set up the spit, though before anything was properly cooked Quina blundered back to the scene, huffing and puffing over their makeshift kitchen until Freya stepped back and let the Qu take over. Steiner eventually realized that without Quina, Her Highness was unaccounted for, and he tore into the brush in quest of her, ignoring Eiko's admonishments.

Supper was ready when Steiner returned with the princess in tow, a coy smile tingeing her cheeks and the laundry in her charge curiously absent. Freya might've made a prying remark on her appearance until Eiko interrupted with a question about Zidane's whereabouts, punting the dragon knight's thought clean out of her head.

The seven settled down to eat, and the missing link arrived with the laundry just as daylight receded. Eiko let Zidane have an earful for letting his portion get cold. Freya was more intrigued by the way his shirt and breeches carried more water than the clothes he was hanging in a tree to finish drying.

“Why are you soaked?”

“I was takin’ a bath,” Zidane answered briskly, busy with a heavy green shirt that draped from its limb like an oversized leaf.

“You were taking a bath,” Freya bounced back, no mistaking her skepticism.

“Yeah,” he asserted. Garnet doubled over, her face cupped in her hands with what Freya could swear was a giggle. Steiner’s armor rustled belligerently, the stern line of his jaw preaching disbelief. Eiko cawed, “Hah! Zidane wouldn’t be caught dead near a bath!”

When the thief elected not to dignify that outburst, Freya pressed him. “You. A bath.”

“Yes.” For someone rarely serious, he was an expert at acting so.

“In your clothes.”

“Yeah, wanna make somethin’ of it?” It was a mirthful challenge, though his tail jerked irritably, and just beneath the facade was a testy nerve that nobody was in the mood to pluck.

“Certainly not,” Freya yielded, and the subject changed to the weather.

“There’s lightning,” Amarant spoke from his throne of shadows, gesturing with a subtle nod towards the eastern horizon. Everyone paused and squinted until the apparition repeated itself, a distant thunderhead shimmering like a cymbal.

“It’s not supposed to rain again,” Eiko proclaimed, her hands on her dainty hips with an air of pretension. “My grandpa said that if the sky is red when the sun sets it’s going to be clear all night. Sailors went by it all the time.”

“Looks like a storm is sailing this way. So much for that,” the bounty hunter scoffed, and Eiko stomped in his direction.

“Are you calling my grandpa a liar?!” Freya imagined her fists balled into tiny white knots beneath her plum red sleeves.

“I read a similar adage in a book once,” Garnet offered, pacifying the argument.

“Are we going to sleep outside again?” Vivi asked warily.

“We’ll keep our tents up, just in case,” Freya declared with a bout of authority that she wasn’t self-conscious of until after she said it. The camp exchanged apprehensive nods, not questioning her anyway. They had already erected their tents hours ago, while it was drizzling, and no one had the energy left to pack them up, besides.

Zidane finished his chore and stepped into their circle, whistling and bright as usual, any sullen temper behind him. “I hope it doesn’t rain; all that wash will get wet again.”

Thunder rolled over the plains like a hell-bound caravan, dumping its torrential payload on flowers and trees already swamped by the day’s summer showers. It turned out to be a blustery, inert storm, all grumbling and hissing without any wind to carry out the bluff. Flat-footed rain tried to trample the group’s huddling of tents, and bolts of light occasionally cracked their feeble attempts at slumber. It was a miserable end to a dreary, bruise-

ridden day, and all anyone could do was stay as dry as possible while waiting for peace and rest.

Zidane stretched over the dank floor of Freya's tent (there wasn't a second thought anymore; they were tent-mates out of habit), his lean shape conforming to the narrow, steepled corners. He rested his head on his arms and began to idly comb the tip of his tail between his bare toes, bored stiff. The dragon knight was also restless, though self-disciplined enough to sit still as she watched out the flap of the tent. Rain sounded monotonously all around, though once in a while she could see it as well, in fickle, booming starbursts.

He was about to ask what could possibly fascinate a *Burmecian* about a *rainstorm*, but then her body language drew his attention. She knelt almost prostrate to the ground, propped on her elbows with her hands folded around her knees. Her gaze was locked timorously on the outdoors, and with every celestial quake her whole body would shrink an inch, eyes flaring wide and ears slicking back. She would recover with aching slowness, ears gradually swiveling high and forward at full alert, until the next stroke of lightning knocked them down again.

Once he realized what was going on, his laughter almost eclipsed the thunder. “Ah, hahaha, hahahahaha!”

Through the turbulent half-light he saw her head jerk over her shoulder and aim a glare at him. “What’s so funny?” Her voice retained its usual poise despite her cowering posture.

“You, you… ahaha!” He struggled with his inflamed sense of humor until he’d harnessed enough breath to spit out, “You’re scared of thunder!”

He could almost see the hair on her ears stand up like pins, and her words wavered on a screech. “I am certainly not!”

“Oh yeah?” Zidane abruptly sat up. “Look me in the eye and tell me you’re not.”

The slandered dragon knight picked herself up, taking the bait. She leveled a searing glare at the boy’s teasing smirk and began to spit, “How dare you—”

The atmosphere split with an unholy clatter, the sound fierce enough to rattle the tent’s flimsy supports. Freya ducked to the ground so fast she could’ve left a smoke trail. Thunder blasted again in

a swift encore, and if any of the others were riled from their tents, Zidane couldn't notice over the embarrassingly effeminate squeal his companion emitted.

He took one look at her, cringing in the dirt with her hands clapped around her ears, and collapsed like a house of cards, limbs thrashing in every direction. The impossible image broke something fundamental in him: Freya Crescent, the cultured, sensible, impeccable voice of reason, laid low like a timid little mouse.

By *thunder*. "Ahahahaha!"

Eventually the outdoor din subsided, until only the rain and Zidane's crude cackling filled the air. She scooped up her wits and glowered at him.

"Maybe I am," she tersely conceded, "But you don't have to be such a boar about it! And quit flopping around before you knock the whole tent down!"

His crowing didn't relent. "Oh man, I'm gonna tell everyone."

"By the gods' blood you'll tell no one!"

“*Everyone*. Ahah, I’m going to tell them you sound just like an itty bitty titmouse when you’re frigh—mrmph!”

Freya sprang across the tent and smothered his big fat mouth—with a blanket, failing a pillow (a luxury they had to ditch many nights ago.) Zidane sputtered and flailed under the onslaught, pinned to the floor by the weight of her outrage, and his tail slapped her thigh to no avail. As a last resort he spouted through the thin fabric, “Ack-hahak—I can —still breathe, you know!”

She ripped the blanket away, setting him free with a disgusted grunt, and the boy floundered through a few more wheezing laughs, finally running out of wind. He rolled over and pasted his hands to his sides, reigning in his hysteria with some deep gulps of air. “Ow, ahaha, oh my ribs, I laughed so hard it hurt.”

“Serves you right. Are you quite done?” Freya asked peevishly.

He settled at last, tail wrapping loosely around his ankles, and wiped the tears from his eyes. “Okay, okay. Seriously, I, ahaha, what? *Thunder*? Are you kidding me? Doesn’t it rain *constantly* where you’re from?”

“Yes, rain, never storms!” she petulantly explained. Burmecia truly didn’t know the sound of thunder; its perpetual rainfall was as much a blessing as it was a curse, that way.

“Never?” He still couldn’t believe it. It was a chink in her armor, a little paradox in her headstrong, independent nature. It was totally ridiculous. “You’ve never seen lightning before, not in your whole life.” It was almost charming, really.

“Of course I’ve seen it before, you dullard. Just never this close!” A rumble overhead pinched her with a shiver, and he merely chuckled at her misery. *‘Insensitive jerk!’*

His tone mellowed, reasoning. “It’s nothing to be scared of, y’know. It’s just bright and noisy. I mean seriously, you have more of a chance of an air cab dropping out of the sky and crushing you in your sleep than you do of being struck by lightning. Unless you decide to run out there and wave your spear around like a lunatic, I guess. Metal poles tend to attract electricity.”

“Don’t lecture me like a child on this!” she bit back, no taste for his condescension.

“Well you’re acting like one!” he chortled, still making light of her humiliation.

Refusing to take that, Freya turned away, tuning him out. Ahead of her, a film of rain glossed the opening in their tent’s flap. Behind her, the thief appealed, “Aw com’on, don’t be like that. I didn’t mean to laugh *that* hard. You don’t have to be ashamed of anything. It’s no big deal, y’know?”

Freya sniffed indignantly. She didn’t have to listen to the likes of that from the likes of him. She didn’t need anyone’s cheap consolation to deal with a thunderstorm. It was just another obstacle, like a monster, or a high wall, or a rough mountain trail, and if she couldn’t overcome it, she’d simply bear it and grow stronger on her own. She always did.

At length Zidane sighed, a small, defeated sound. “Fine then. You can look out for lightning all night if you want, but I’m exhausted. I’m going to sleep.”

The rain didn’t disperse, nor the thunder, though both faded into the background enough to lull the campers into an uneasy sleep. Freya dreamed of the gods snoring in the clouds. Reis reached from her majestic altar to brush her arm, and then twice, and

then on the third time she started to think something might be strange, though instead of enquiring she woke up.

Haphazard fingers skittered across her wrist, and Freya realized the interruption was less divine and more critical. She looked for her tent-mate and found him in an unconscious tantrum, digging his toes in the ground and grasping for invisible purchase with his hands. His eyes were screwed shut and his lips quivered in a raging dream.

Freya considered his state for a long minute, and whether breaking his nightmare would be safer than letting him ride it out. Waking up naturally would be the best thing, she supposed, but—

The dream took an ominous turn, a plaintive wail rising from his throat. A spasm kicked his tail, his legs started to churn the air and his hands clawed erratically at nothing. Freya decided to put a stop to it before he inadvertently punched her in the nose or something, but the instant she grabbed his shoulders Zidane railed against her, swinging at his unseen enemies with heightened vigor. Suddenly she was wrestling against all his desperate might, and when the boy started screaming, “No, no! No!! Help!! Oh gods, help me!!” Freya was chilled to the core.

“Zidane!!” She pooled her strength into her legs and shoved him back to the ground, butting his head against the floor with excessive force. He twitched all over and then finally stopped.

Everything grew still. Freya thought even the rain hesitated, but when she exhaled it was there, applauding the muttering thunder. She couldn’t hear anything beyond, in the other tents; seems their scuffle went unnoticed. At a loss for what to do now, she squatted on her congealing thoughts.

What just happened? Was he attacking her? Defending himself? Was he even *aware*? He must have been dreaming the whole thing. She never knew Zidane to be afflicted with sleepwalking, nor night terrors. Maybe it was stress? From what? Why wasn’t he moving? Did he go back to sleep? Did she tackle him too hard? What if she’d knocked the life out of him?

To her relief, the body beneath her shifted, breathing raggedly. A sunken, bewildered look turned up to her. “Freya…?”

She swallowed. “Yes, it’s me. Are you okay?”

Zidane croaked something unintelligible and threw himself at her, burying his face in her

shoulder. Freya rocked back on her haunches and accepted the strange bundle, too stunned to react otherwise. He was trembling and he smelled like sweat and he clung to her like a sticker bush as he started prattling, “I was, I was trapped, in the Iifa Tree, and nobody could hear me and all those roots were coming after me and I couldn’t get out, and I, it felt so real. I was alone. Gods, I was so alone…”

Freya’s heart melted. He was fine, and stupid, but fine—or simply stupid, and she felt a little dumber just touching him, but for once it was a good feeling. She tucked him in her arms and rested her chin on his head, whispering dulcetly, “Shh, no more. You’re not alone. It was just a dream. Nothing to be scared of, like thunder, right?”

Now he was the one being patronized like a child, and he snickered at the irony. “Ahaha. Good one.” He sniffled and wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “Augh. I’m sorry.”

For what? For waking her? For scaring the wits out of her? For getting snot on her blouse? For laughing at her earlier?

It really didn’t matter anymore. She patted his hair. “I know.”

He sighed and reclined in her lap, savoring her maternal comfort just a moment longer. Freya stewed in the benign silence. It was funny; Zidane was *almost bearable* like this. Quiet, submissive… vulnerable. On second thought, it didn't suit him at all.

Then she noticed the cause of his ailing disposition, the alarming heat radiating from his skin, and she swept the back of her hand over his brow to confirm it. "You're burning up!"

He blinked numbly. "Uh? Naw."

A proper scolding surfaced in her tone. "Yes, you dolt."

"Oh," he uttered with bland surprise, as if she had just made some casual observation on the weather or last year's tomato crop. 'Go figure. I am feelin' kinda… swarmy.' He grimaced. "That's not the right word, is it?"

"I don't think that's a word at all."

"Okay." He lolled out of her arms, taking drowsy hold of the floor. "Mmm, just lemme sleep it off."

"No! It'll take just a minute to get you some gods-honest medicine." She untangled their limbs

and left him in a heap on top of the blanket. “Park it right there.”

“Totally not going anywhere,” spoke the disheveled lump, and he made no move to correct his lopsided position as Freya lit a small lamp, set it on the ground at the rear of the tent and ferreted through her travel bag.

She fished for clues as well as medicine (Eiko’s herb-hunting skills proved invaluable, especially for mixing potions), wondering what could’ve invited this illness. She then recalled an inane story fed to her hours ago.

“How DID you get soaked earlier, anyway? And no rubbish about bathing.” She shot him a second, cross look. “And quit sitting like a chimp with its head stuck up its bum. Lie down like a human being.”

“Oh.” His thighs hit the floor with a thump, his every word and action drunk with malaise—compliant in a distinctly addled, lazy way. “Had an accident, doin’ the laundry,” he admitted, remarkably candid—perhaps also out of laziness.

“I don’t want to know what a ‘laundry accident’ entails.”

He stared into space with a guileless, lame grin, and when he didn't elaborate, she snipped, "What are you so happy about?"

"…Dagger made a pass at me."

Freya leaned across the blanket and tested his forehead again. "You must really be ill; you're delirious."

He bunted her arm away. "A gentleman never kisses and tells," he said roguishly.

"That's why you're about to tell me everything, isn't it?" A scandalous, intrigued side of the woman repressed the snide edge to her tone, prompting him instead. She was afraid she actually wanted to hear this.

"It wasn't me this time!" He wasted no time setting up his defense, his speech suddenly lively and a healthy blush painting over the sick one. "I swear to Hades I was being good. I was helping her with the laundry, we had a nice little chat…" He rolled the words on his wrist for emphasis. "I go to walk away and BAM: she, she grabs it."

Freya mussed up her brow, disconcerted already. "*It?*"

“Yeah, you know, my… my tail,” he stammered weakly, and Freya could’ve hit the floor for reading him correctly. Dagger did *what*? To his *what*? And what’s more, Zidane Tribal, acting *uncomfortable*? About his tail? The word “shy” nearly darted across her mind, but the thought might’ve made her explode, and she was trying to handle delicate chemicals. She’d seen enough strange sides of him tonight to fill a scrapbook, but this was by far the most bizarre.

He thankfully misinterpreted her astonishment. “I know, unbelievable, right? She didn’t warn me or anything—just started petting it, like a cat or something. And I’m trying to sort it out in my head, like, *why would she do that*, and what is she even *thinking*, but I can’t get a grip on it—I’d just finished telling her not to grab it! I mean, my tail is really, ah, you know…”

“Sensitive?”

He recoiled from the less-than-manly label. “No! I mean, ah, yes. Okay, so it is. But that just makes it worse!”

“So what did you do?” Freya didn’t bother hiding her fascination at this point.

“I-I was in shock at first! I didn’t know what she expected me to do! But hey, if someone did that to *your* tail that’s making a move, right? It was totally a pass—I thought it was, anyway. So what do you think I did? *I passed back*.”

“Dear gods, you didn’t…” She held a hand to her lips, checking her volume. The last thing she needed was to wake her sleeping neighbors over gossip, especially about the next queen of Alexandria.

Zidane crossed his arms with a sour grumble. “Don’t worry, nothing serious happened. Captain Cockblock showed up and ruined the moment. Took her away and made me finish all that laundry by myself. Anyway, that’s when I fell in the creek.”

“Gee, you poor thing,” Freya offered her sarcasm. “And once again the uncouth street monkey doesn’t get to kiss the beautiful princess. A true tragedy if I ever heard one.”

His frown inverted with a sly wink. “Who said we didn’t get to kiss?”

Freya rolled her eyes, crawled closer and passed the boy a shaken vial. “Whatever, Mister Romantic. If you think I believe a word of that tall tale, your

brain is already cooked. Take this for your fever, anyway."

He swallowed the herbal potion with a bitter shudder. "Geez, think you could make up a less obvious way to poison m—"

Thunder knocked loud and clear, breaking the storm's deceptive hiatus, and before Zidane even had room to curse, Freya yelped like a kicked puppy and dove for cover—right on top of him. The bombshell of light and sound disoriented them both while the heavens roiled for an agonizing minute, nibbling at the Burmecian's shattered composure.

The minute after was spent assembling her pieces of dignity and reason, and that was when Freya grew crushingly aware of how close Zidane was, his breath teasing the hair below her ear and his wild body heat kindling her cool fur like a grass fire. She froze, an uncertain, portentous buzzing under her skin and in her joints, and before she could deliberate the best way *out*, a furtive hand curled around her shoulder, anchoring her to the spot. He leaned in, dreadfully close, dusted her collarbone with two feather-soft, heady-warm pecks, and then pulled away as gently as if he had never moved.

Freya was struck speechless. What just—did she imagine—he just *kissed her*, didn't he?

Zidane kissed her. *Zidane*. Why? What was he trying to say? What was she supposed to *think*? What was his game?? Wasn't he just bragging about his little romp with Dagger? Was this even comparable to that? Was this his way of thanking her, or making fun of her again? Did he think he could get away with that??

At the lattermost (and most likely) notion she bolted up, back arched and hackles raised like a scorned cat, her hand poised to reprimand him clean across the face—for the impropriety of it all, if nothing else. However, her fury ebbed at the sight of his sallow complexion and closed eyes in the lamplight, and his slow yet heavy breathing, lost in a fit of sleep.

She nudged his arm, the claw of her thumb deliberately scraping the skin, to no reaction at all.

'He's passed out. Unbelievable.'

Freya shook her head, giving up. He could have his rest for now; she'd make him rue some other day.

Still, it tortured her, even as she burrowed under the blanket and turned in to sleep: *Why?*

Was she reading too much into it? Was it—gods forbid—a genuine gesture of affection? Did he feel *that way* about… whatever it was they had?

Friendship?

No, she ultimately concluded, it was just a dose of delirium—just a little fever, just a little crazy. She had sprinkled some sleeping weed in that medicine, after all. He probably wouldn't even remember come morning, and that was for the best.

Far and away, on the fringes of dreams and memory and behind a veil of thunderclouds, Reis agreed.

5. The Ribbon

Freya Crescent was absolutely, positively resolute not to speak to Zidane Tribal the rest of the day, if ever again.

It was not supposed to be a traumatic day. Everyone was still searching for clues regarding the reappearance of the wretched Mist, yet every lead was as scattered and confounding as the Iifa Tree's great, plundering roots. Though the intrepid little group held their heads high against the odds of finding and defeating Kuja once and for all, in light of the lack of sunlight, it seemed as if their long struggle was going to be in vain. Morale was on the verge of stagnating, though as the group's queen-to-be pointed out, this lull in their journey was an excellent opportunity to replenish their supplies, upgrade their armor and weapons, and otherwise prepare for the inevitable.

Quina was eager to resume hir training under Master Quale (or s/he had a good excuse for going to hunt more frogs), so the group decided to park their airship by the marshlands the Qu called home,

leave Quina to hir business and march to the Dragon's Gate, to rest and restock in Lindblum.

It was a combination of bad luck, the Mist, an aside from Dagger about marshes being "cursed," a seemingly trivial outburst from Quina about the local fauna and a certain thief's impetuous curiosity that completely derailed their simple excursion, and by the time the party finally reached the city limits Freya was in such high dudgeon that even Vivi was impressed by her moody silence.

"She seems mad…" the tiny mage whispered gravely as he watched the dragon knight storm up the stairs, her naked tail kicking up the skirt of her coat like a blood red war banner. They were traversing one of the iron-forged access tunnels that led into the city proper, and between the rusty archways and churning ventilation fans, their conversation echoed like a lightning bolt through a copper pipe.

"Can you blame her?" Eiko piped up. She squared her hands on her hips and tossed a lecture over her shoulder. "Zidane, you spoony thief! That was a really thoughtless stunt you pulled back there! You couldn't just leave it alone, could you?"

“Hey!” the accused spouted from the back the line. “Don’t lay it all on me! Quina’s the one who said we could bag one!”

“And *you’re* the one who took off with all our gear to make a trap for it without asking!” Eiko fired back.

Defensive to a fault, Zidane projected loud enough for the interested party to hear, “Oh com’on, it wasn’t that big a deal! It’s just a ribbon! If it’s any consolation, I lost mine too!” He ruffled his untied mop of dirty blonde hair to illustrate.

Freya shook her head and huffed loudly enough to pause a courtroom, not even glancing back. Eiko carried on her case, righteously argumentative. “And all our rope, and our skillet, and our best medicine bag! Now we have to waste our precious gil replacing it all!”

“Alright, alright, geez, I’m sorry!” Zidane belted impenitently. ‘It’s not like I planned for that ironite to show up! If it hadn’t set off the trap, we could’ve caught a real live leafer! You have any idea how rare those are? Most people don’t think they exist! The pelt alone would’ve raked us in a ton of money.’ He indicated the princess with a flat hand. “Besides, I was doing it to prove to Dagger those marshes aren’t

cursed. A leafer foot is the best good luck charm in the world, you know."

"Looks like you went ahead and proved yourself wrong," Dagger remarked with an airy smirk. Her bodyguard, who likewise appreciated the irony (if for no other reason than to see it prevail against the thief), flashed a smugly pleased look, and that set the Genome fuming.

"Oh whatever, you guys suck," was his final statement. With a sulking shrug he followed them out of the passage and into the Business District, where the party immediately and remorselessly dispersed.

Whatever his score of wrongdoings with women, Zidane knew better than to push his luck with an angry female—much less three of them. He avoided the whole lot until after dark, when it was time to check in for the night. It was easy to lose oneself in Lindblum, a city abundant in distractions, and Zidane had no doubt his friends could take care of themselves. Since he wouldn't be missed, he could have pestered his Tantalus brothers for a sleeping pad and avoided the hassle of an inn altogether, but

even if his traveling companions were set in their own ways, he wanted to ensure they all had a safe place to rest.

Besides, as a final blow to his ego and some manipulative form of punishment for the leafer fiasco, Eiko had confiscated the group's purse from him (despite his appeals to Dagger, who only agreed with the indomitable six-year-old.) He would still like to keep track of their money, even if he wasn't allowed to touch it.

The Lucky Bobo Inn was where Vivi stayed his first night in the big city, and the first place Zidane checked. His guess was rewarded correctly, as he found three rooms set for the party upstairs. Unfortunately, the first relevant person he encountered was Steiner, who grudgingly indicated that they would be sharing the third room, since the ladies and children occupied the other two. Amarant had fallen off the map, and no one was expecting his return until morning. This didn't surprise Zidane in the slightest; Amarant was much like the cats from which he fashioned his fighting claws, with a penchant for solitude and contempt of crowds that drove him from sight whenever his presence wasn't absolutely necessary (or supper wasn't being served.)

Zidane shrugged off the knight's warnings about "behaving," 'respectable establishments' and "giving the princess some peace" to roam the halls for a while before bed. Some familiar, childlike squeaks drew him to a door that cracked open without a hitch. When he stuck his head through, the girl perched on the farther of the two beds tipped a reproving frown his way.

"Zidane, you should knock," Dagger chided, though her tone lacked force, and the thief could swear she tucked away a smile as she resumed her bedtime grooming.

He shrugged affably. "I like to surprise people."

"You like to get in trouble, you mean."

"It's what I do best! So… what did you do today?"

"We went shopping. What about you?"

"Ah, just…" His eyes glued to the silver hairbrush in the princess's hand, its handle glazed with mother-of-pearl. It was the only item of luxury she had insisted on carrying. Her hair once fell to the small of her back, a beautiful river of black silk, and she always took special care of it, but it was obvious she wasn't used to handling short hair by the way

her arms jerked in clumsy circles at every missed stroke. Zidane would have pounced on her plight with an offer to “help” if he weren’t too absorbed with the luscious slope of her back, kindly exposed by the low cut of her overalls. *‘Damn, she never stops lookin’ fine…’*

A spatter of shifting color on the floor next to the other bunk snagged his attention, followed by a little girl’s sharp, cheerful command. “Zidane! Come here!”

He stepped around the foot of the bed and beheld the mess: Vivi and Eiko getting eaten by a pile of dusty quilts and pillows. The Black Mage was studying the patchwork quagmire in his lap with a confused pinch to his eyes, while the white mage flapped a pillow in each hand like a bloated set of wings.

“Uh, what’s up?”

The day’s earlier misgivings were apparently forgotten as the girl petitioned matter-of-factly, “Tell Vivi how to make a pillow fort! He doesn’t know *anything*.”

Vivi craned a “please help” look up to the Genome, and Zidane smirked benevolently. “Aw,

that’s not true. Vivi knows how to set a cat’s tail on fire from fifty yards off.”

“W-Why would I do that?” Vivi stuttered, mortified, as Eiko countered, ‘We can’t make a pillow fort out of fire!’ As if needing to reinforce that, she bluntly told the mage, “*No* fire.”

“I know that!” Vivi squawked like a baby garuda. “I’m just saying, I don’t think we have enough pillows to make a fort.”

Zidane squatted on the wooden floor, taking stock of the cushy materials. “Vivi’s right, you really don’t…” He gathered a pillow in each hand, a grin sneaking onto his face. “But you have just enough for a pillow fight!”

“Wha—” Vivi’s question was smothered by his hat as he fell under the first strike. “Eee!” Eiko squealed, jumping up and fighting in his stead. She took one large pillow by the hilt and swung it over her head, blocking the lighthearted barrage of linen and stuffing from the thief. Vivi recovered a moment later and, suddenly catching the spirit of the game, picked up the last pillow and flailed with all his might, eyes squinted shut.

Zidane treated them with a villainous stage-laugh. “Ahaha, I take you both on at once! I am super dual-wielding pillow master of quilt mountain!”

“Noooo!” Vivi wailed as he landed in a heap of titters and thrashing limbs, his pillow more of a shield than a club. Their weapons’ downy innards began to rain over the three as the battle escalated, each blow like an exploding dove. In a burst of bravado Eiko leapt onto her assailant’s back, declaring “*En guarde*!” while she pummeled the back of his head.

Zidane wavered as the little girl boxed his ears, and his cackling broke into crude laughter. “Ack, ahaha, what? Pillow fighting—is not—ahaha—a contact sport!” he sputtered, feathers muffling his vision. They traded a few futile swipes before he rolled headlong into the sheets and quilts, taking the little girl down with him. Eiko screeched and Vivi yelped as all the bed linens washed over the three like a tidal wave, leaving a simmering pool of chocobo down, cotton and giggles.

“Hey now,” Dagger’s matronly voice cut into their bedlam, “All of you cut it out! You’re going to ruin those pillows.”

“Avast!” Zidane exchanged the ridiculous villain act for a ridiculous pirate one, emerging from the layers of covers with a flourish. “What have we? A party pooper? Get ’er!”

Like a pair of soldiers, the children eagerly rushed the princess’s bed, pillows in hand. “Pillow fight! Pillow fight!” they chimed as Dagger took a fluffy beating.

“Eek! Ehehehe!” Dagger scrambled for one of her own pillows and feebly held it against the pincer attack. Her crying laughter reached a high pitch once Zidane joined the fray, springing onto the bed and doubling the pillow offensive. “Oh—oh quit it! I—hehe—h-help!”

As if on call, the door swung wide open, Steiner’s imposing bellow filling the room. “What’s all this racket? People are trying to sleep around here!” His gaze stopped on the besieged princess, crowned with a wreath of stray feathers. Her freshly brushed hair suddenly resembled a raven’s nest. “What are you doing to the princess now??”

Zidane’s devilish grin brightened, and he aimed a finger at the knight. “Whuh-oh, the fun police! Attack!”

Vivi and Eiko swarmed him at once, this time chanting, “Fun police! Fun police! Fun police!” while their pillows buffeted his pajamas. Bewildered, Steiner recoiled into the hallway. ‘What? Stop that! Desist! Cease this assault!’ A prominent hit sent a plume of feathers into his face, and the knight rocketed to the wall with a sneeze. “Ah, ACHOO!!”

The kids delighted in Steiner’s bumbling manner, and they hounded him all the way to his quarters. “Fun police!”

“Stop that! I can’t stand—ah—ah-choo!”

“Hehehehehe!”

Left alone on the bed with the princess, crafty thief fingers crept across the covers, accompanied by a leer. “Hmm, now it’s just you and me…”

Dagger stopped him in his tracks with an outstretched foot, gruffly shoving him off the edge. “Oh, get off.”

Zidane caught the floor and sprang back, “I’ve been trying to!”

A pillow chased him from the room. “Get *out*.”

Steiner eventually ejected the pirate kids from his room and went on a hunt for their captain, but the thief knew how not to be found, so the knight's threats went to naught.

Zidane knew he couldn't hide forever, of course, and once the hall was dark and quiet he stalked it freely again. He was just passing another door on the way to bed when it abruptly flew open, casting him in a swath of oily lamplight. He was so startled that he almost didn't recognize the silhouette towering over him, clad in a simple blouse and breeches and ears pointed at a menacing angle, like demonic horns.

"You!" a she-voice boomed. It was Freya. She sounded *pissed*.

Clueless and caught in the headlight, Zidane fecklessly pointed at himself. "Me?"

"In here," she barked, her bruesque manner a page straight from Amarant's book. Before Zidane could say another word he was being hoisted by the collar through the threshold, protesting with all the eloquence of an oglop. "Wha—gwk!"

Freya slammed the door more neatly than humanly possible, dragged him to the foot of the bed

and threw him down, the bedposts scuffing the floor with the forceful jolt. She had her claws so tightly ensnared in the lace of his tie that he could hardly swallow, much less break away, though after a few moments of being stared down like a criminal at the execution block, he managed to croak, “W-What’s up?”

“You know what’s up,” she snapped, her stance not relenting.

Zidane really didn’t understand what Freya’s problem was. Unlike Eiko and Dagger, the dragon knight’s grievance was far beyond mere annoyance, because if that were the only matter she would have clocked him on the head and been done with it hours ago. Sure, he could have asked permission before taking her tail ribbon, but he was too excited at the prospect of a rare catch and too eager—once again—to prove himself to Dagger to mind such simple courtesies. Apparently the trap needed a lot more rope and string than he had expected—he’d even sacrificed his ponytail tie for the job, and at the end of the day all he had to show for it was a bad rap and a lousy hairdo.

At any rate, this shouldn’t have surprised Freya; she already knew him to be too rash for his own

good, sometimes. So why the nasty treatment?

“Are you still mad about that leafer trap? It wasn’t that big a deal! Were you especially attached to that ribbon for some reason? Did I break some kind of secret dragon knight club taboo thing? Is it your *time of the month*, what??”

She wrenched his tie into an effectively painful choker as she seethed through her teeth, “*Keep digging*.”

“Grk—okay I’m—I’m sorry!” he wheezed, struggling against her steely grip. With a disdainful snort she let him go and paced away. Zidane glanced around the room while he caught his breath and straightened his collar.

The quarters were smaller than Dagger, Eiko and Vivi’s, with a single bed and lonely window box, though the ornate dresser with a mounted looking glass compensated for the lack of space. Bare wooden floors and rafters were fenced in with flowery wallpaper the color of fresh mould, and in the blue night light with a few candles and lanterns lit, the walls looked like they were made of stale cheese. Standing in the corner directly across from him was a sharpened halberd, Freya’s leather satchel hanging by its curved ridges.

He chanced a look over his shoulder and found her rifling through a dresser drawer, no explanation pending. What was she thinking? What was she planning? The silence was dreadful, the need to break it like an itch crawling up his raw throat. The best he could muster, though, was a rather petulant, “I’m sorry.”

There was no response, save the punctuating clap of metal striking the wooden slab of the dresser. She stood with her back in his line of sight, so he couldn’t see what she was toying with, and that mystery only heightened the tension. Zidane swallowed and tried again, this time modulating his tone to something almost earnest. “I am, really.”

Surprising him once again was the flat, soft drop of her voice. “I know you are.”

He shook his head, thoroughly confused. “Then why are you—”

Freya crossed the room in three swift, soundless strides, landing behind him on the bed and catching him by the ruff of his neck. His last thought was snuffed out with a harsh tug on a fistful of blonde hair. “Ah! Ow woman, that hurts!”

“I don’t want to hear the sound of your voice tonight!” the dragon knight declared, the stranglehold on his once-ponytail all the authority she needed.

“But I—”

“*No*.”

Zidane bit his lip, considering his options. He could try to jump away and get hurt or try to talk his way out of this and get hurt. He wasn’t even sure what “this” was yet, but it wasn’t shaping up to be good.

Freya promptly laid out her terms. “If you want to make it up to me, you’ll be quiet.” Though it was impossible to see her face the way she was kneeling behind him, he could practically hear an awful, devious smile in her next words. “And let me fix your hair.”

Vow of silence instantly forgotten, Zidane whirled around, hackles raised with a nonplussed screech. “What’s *wrong* with—”

A smart cuff on the side of the head bent him back the other way. “*Shut up*. Sit still.”

Wary of further punishment, he folded his hands in his lap and screwed his eyes shut, not daring another peep. He didn't know what to think. At least when the boss was mad at him, retribution was immediate and obvious: he got his lights knocked out. Freya was being an awful *female* about it, though, and damned if he knew how women worked. Then again, even Ruby spelled out her bad tempers, loud and clear; everyone within two city blocks would know what was ruffling her feathers.

Freya was just being, so… so *Freya*.

The sound of slicing metal grew distinctly close as the object she'd procured from the drawer became evident: a pair of scissors. He shuddered, a nervous spasm flicking his tail across the cool surface of the bed. *'What is she doing? Is she really going to cut it off? I like my hair the way it is! Is she THAT mad at me? Does she expect me to just sit still and take this? What if I don't?…What if I do? Is this some kind of test?'*

No matter how upset she got, Freya would never do anything to *seriously* hurt him, right? He placed his bet on that bizarre form of trust and spoke up, reasoning against madness.

“What was so special about that ribbon, anyway?”

To his relief, his question wasn’t met with injury, just scorn. “Hrmph. I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“Try me!”

“…He gave it to me,” she said at length, the weighty undertones lingering beneath her tongue.

“Who?” Realization slapped him in the face. ‘Oh.…Oh.’ He slouched as much as he was allowed, feeling truly contrite for the first time that day. “My bad.”

“It was the only thing I had left of him, before he…” Freya let the memory go with a tapering sigh.

“Well he’s still alive, right? He can give you a new one. Ow!” Freya pinched his ear hard enough to draw a freckle of blood. “You are the least sensitive fool on the planet,” she said bitterly.

“I’m just trying to hel—ah! Ow! Oh gods!” Once his arm was twisted half-way up his back he gave up, nothing left to fight once the strident edge to her voice returned.

“Did you hear nothing in that part about shutting up?? Honestly, you are the gods’ bane, Zidane Tribal.”

She gave back his arm and let him stew in whimpers. For many grueling minutes the only sounds in the room were uneasy breathing and the munching of shears. He could feel her clawed fingers combing his hair, hitching on tangles and (if only he could explain) feathers, and once in a while she would cluck, “Tch, filthy,” as if he were meant to apologize for his unkempt state, too. Telltale wisps tickled his shoulders and slid away, gone for good, and for lack of any mercy from his captor, he simply squinted his eyes, curled his toes, crossed his fingers and prayed it would all be over quickly.

“…There. I’m done.”

Though he could sense her moving away from him, he didn’t budge for several seconds, lest sudden movement rekindle the lady’s wrath. Zidane gradually—cautiously—slid off the side of the bed, getting back to his feet and running his hands through his scissor-ravaged hair. He couldn’t feel any damage, nor blood, nor a draught… It was just trimmed a bit, neat and away from his eyes. He hardly felt any different, just a little… lighter. It was

a rather soft, savory sensation. He blinked, confounded. Was that all she wanted to do?

He didn't have much time to mourn over the pile of sandy-blonde trimmings left on the mat before Freya swept them into a rubbish bin, packed the shears away and set a heavy hand on his shoulder, driving him towards the door. "All right, go."

Zidane stumbled and hesitated in the opening, until his feather-addled thoughts found a voice. "Uh… that's it?"

"Do you want a cookie?" Freya snipped, the sarcasm strangely neutral. "Go on, go to bed."

Obediently, he started to leave. "Oh wait," Freya held him back, inducing a cringe.

'I knew that wasn't it,' he lamented, yet endured the rueful wait. He watched her dig something small and obscure out of her travel pack. On her return, she faced him the other way and ordered, "Hold still. One more thing." After some fidgeting she stepped back and announced, "There. That's it."

He reflexively reached around his neck and sought out her addition, and in a second his fingers twined around a strip of thin, smooth material…

A ribbon. She'd tied back his (now shorter) ponytail with a ribbon. He gaped at her, utterly cowed by the gesture. "Freya, I…" *don't know what to say.*

She stood tall in the doorway, ears relaxed and fine silver hair slicked with gold in the ample candlelight. Any trace of malice was missing from the midnight pools of her eyes as she peered down at him in a funny, tilted, appraising way, as if admiring her own work.

Finally she said, impressively deadpan, "You're forgiven." And shut the door in his face.

Zidane was left alone in the hall, appreciative, guilty and mystified.

The next morning Amarant showed up on the inn's doorstep, no questions asked, and the group departed Lindblum with refreshed spirits.

The spent pillows cost them 250 gil, which was about all that was left by the time Eiko returned the purse to Zidane. Before he could interrogate her on the matter, she cleverly interrupted, "Say, you look a little different! Hmm… Hey, did you cut your hair?"

Zidane scratched his head, considering it. “Uh yeah, I did! Dagger’s not the only one allowed to, y’know.”

Eiko then bounded away, blameless and satisfied, and the thief was left to contemplate their poor savings, exotic traps and haircuts.

In the back of his mind, he wondered if it meant something, to be given a red ribbon.

6. Random Encounters

Warning: strong sexual content and language ahead.…Moreso than usual, I guess.

Recommended reading this round: MasterShaper's "Beasts of Gaia." It's very interesting and sorely overlooked, probably because of its unique format. One of its entries in particular inspired this chapter (heheheh), so be sure to check it out and show your appreciation… Y'all might be pleasantly surprised.

"It's dangerous outside! Kupo!"

Zidane studied the escalating passage in one of the remote corners of Gizamaluke's Grotto. He stood at the bottom and peered up through the slimy, serrated bricks and clinging vines, a dank draught playing with his hair. Freya could see by the way he scratched his chin and curled the tip of his tail that his curiosity was piqued.

"Dangerous means tough monsters to fight, right?" His question echoed narrowly to the top of

the chimney-like shaft, mingling with dabbles of promising daylight.

The moogle wagged his whole body emphatically. “I wouldn’t go looking for a fight up there! Kupo!” Moguta’s wife chimed in with a nod, while one of her litter clung to her drooping pom-pom. “The most dangerous monsters live outside! We stay down here to keep our family safe! Kupo!”

Freya frowned, a portentously heavy humor flooding her stomach. “I would heed them, Zidane. I’ve never explored the area, myself, but I know of the plateau above the grotto, and it is said grand dragons lurk thereon.”

“Grand dragons, eh…?” Zidane parroted with a crafty grin, making the venture sound impossibly enticing. He began to test his weight on some crude footholds. “Even better. It’ll be a great chance to work on our skills.”

Freya struck the ground with the butt of her lance, mindful not to impale one of the baby moogles toddling around her feet. “Are you even listening? Grand dragons are not to be trifled with! Not even a dragon knight would challenge a grand on his own. It takes a whole team of experienced hunters to bring one down!”

Zidane was halfway up and out of the moogles' den before her words finished reaching him. His voice was like a spectre calling back, "We're a team! And we're experienced! Com'on Freya, quit being a pansy and let's check it out."

"And what about your blasted chocobo??"

"We'll get 'im later! Com'on!"

"Ohh, you…!" She stamped a miffed dance on the ornate stone floor, to no avail. Warning signs such as 'restricted access,' "no trespassing," and even a benevolent "danger ahead" were open invitations to the impudent thief, and once he got an idea to break the rules, no measure of common sense could stop him. She drew a tempering breath and ascended the treacherous, overgrown shaft, the moogles murmuring after them.

The passage eventually gave way to a healthy, prickly forest, and as the pair hacked their way through, Freya contemplated their agenda.

A while ago it was determined that their party of eight should split up once again, each to their own pursuits. Dagger wished to go to Daguerreo, to study the library's collection of magic tomes, especially those on the subject of eidolons. Eiko begged to

accompany her, suddenly showing an acute interest in the same, and she dragged Vivi by the wrist the whole way there.

Quina demanded a trip to yet another marsh (for more "training," s/he professed, though how learning to become a 'super gourmand' was going to help the team was never made clear.) Accordingly, their next stop was the Forgotten Continent, where there was a short-lived debate over whom should keep an eye on the capricious Qu ("I am not babysitting *the thing*," Amarant had snarled as he stalked away, content to take on the monsters of the plains by himself.)

That (not really) settled, the dwindling party flew the Invincible back to the Mist Continent. Steiner expressed some latent need to check on his Pluto Knights, so dropping him off at Alexandria was in order (and for Zidane's remark that he would be "checking on Beatrix alllll niiight," the thief nearly got clobbered by the red-faced knight.)

The two remaining were at a loss over what to do. They had already scoured Lindblum the other day, there was little to do in the ruined Alexandria, and neither were particularly interested in revisiting the other cities (Freya had vowed not to return to

Burmecia until her quest to vanquish Kuja was complete.) Zidane got a notion to seek out his chocobo, and though the bird's whereabouts were at the bottom of her concerns, Freya tagged along because… well, she wasn't sure. Perhaps she honestly had nothing better to do, and didn't want to be left behind—not again. Some subconscious mechanism was at work, preventing her from being left alone with her darkest, loneliest thoughts. She would have to confront such thoughts one day, she knew, but that was a day best postponed for later, when the fate of the world was not dangling by strings from a madman's fingers.

Instead, she was helping a thief look for a chocobo. Several misguided turns and a trek into the accursed grotto later ("Choco might've passed through here!") she grunted at the futility of the quest, regretting her choice of companionship. She should have followed Amarant off the ship, where at least the hardened beasts of that region would be enough to occupy her wits and strength, conversation with the antisocial bounty hunter notwithstanding. With grand dragons looming in their near future, however, she had to wonder which path was ultimately more perilous.

As if overhearing her discontent, Zidane spoke up as he chopped some thorns out of the way with his daggers. “Hey, what’s up back there? You haven’t said a word in like an hour. You’re not really worried about the monsters, are you?”

She huffed. “One of us has to be!”

“Aw, you need to loosen up.”

“And you need to get a grip. We could be ambushed by dragons any minute.”

“I don’t think…” Zidane paused, squinting off the wayside into some distant brush. “What the hell is that pink thing?”

“What?” A tree stood between Freya and the object of interest, so she couldn’t see what was the matter. She braced for the trouble she’d been dreading since noon, her feet squared on the thin track, her lance outstretched and her ears twitching beneath her helmet.

The bushes virtually exploded and she glimpsed it: the hindquarters of a fat serpent, its scales florid pink and its tapering tail slapping the undergrowth as the creature catapulted in their direction. In the corner of her eye, Freya watched Zidane recoil with

a yell more bewildered than alarmed, “How did one of those get here?!”

The instant it was upon them she saw what he meant: it was a lamia, a reclusive pond-dweller. They rarely trespassed the inhabited parts of the grotto, and even more rarely appeared in broad daylight, so to see one springing from the sunlit belly of a wood was a surprise indeed. Zidane leapt aside as it crashed through their path, a pearl-encrusted scimitar and bladed fan bared in each of its sinewy arms.

Even if it was out of its element, Freya knew what best to do with lamias, and she lunged forward, lance stabbing towards the ridged flesh of its trunk. The monster, as tall as two men and longer yet, caught the attack in its fan, the sturdy handles cinching over the dragon knight’s blade. Before Freya could twist it free Zidane rebounded, a set of daggers raking the lamia’s broad chin, and its wide maw split with a bellow as the monster whirled on him. Freya was locked between relinquishing her polearm and dodging the powerful tail swinging her way, and in her moment of indecision the blow overcame her like a falling tree. She was swatted away like a fly from a mule’s rump, a flurry of leaves clouding her wake as she breached the trees

and sailed into a grassy field. Only by the grace of her training did she keep her weapon in both hands, and it stuck into the earth like an anchor as she deftly landed around it.

“Freya!” her comrade called, and she looked up to find Zidane sprinting out of the woods, weeds and stickers clinging to his trousers and tail like a plague. One wily vine laced his boots and flung him face-first into the grass, just as the lamia barreled into view, sword flourished over the feathery plume of its head, blood streaking between the beads of its eyes and petite tusks bared with the berserked shriek of a harpy.

Freya picked her lance out of the dirt and jumped high and hard, using the clearing to her aerial advantage. She was over the tree line and honing in on the lamia when she noticed Zidane with his daggers, up again and ready to meet the monster. At his advance, however, the lamia halted, sword tucked back and fan sweeping ahead like a shield. As Freya fell closer and saw the blades of the fan ignite with rose-colored flame, she realized it wasn’t defending itself; it was casting a spell.

It was too quick and too late to warn anybody, however, and the last Freya saw before her lance

was driven through the monster's jugular was Zidane getting knocked down by a ball of hot pink light. She tore away from the impact, the lamia's phlegm and purple blood sluicing over her legs, and stood back to take in the lay of the battle.

"Grrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaeeeeeeeecch!!" the skies erupted. It was only long enough for Freya to blink and they appeared, diving out of the clouds like hawks bound for hell, lightning coursing around their iridescent hides and emerald scales. Three dragons large enough to play football with an air cab descended on the lamia in its final throes, crushing its ribcage under their plummeting girths. Freya observed with amazement and horror as one of them closed its jaws around the lamia's head and plucked it off its shoulders like a turnip. Ugly, squelchy, crunchy noises ensued as they began to squabble over the carcass.

As soon as she recovered from the appearance of not only one, but *three* grand dragons, Freya swept her gaze over the plains in hopes of pinpointing a place to hide before any of them realized she was there. A rocky outcropping was found within dashing distance, but before she started taking cover a second thought flashed to mind: where was Zidane?

She crawled through the tall grass, arrowing towards his last location, and nearly tripped over the boy before she discovered him properly. “Zidane!” she rasped, nudging his shoulder, and immediately Freya got the impression that something was… not right.

He wasn’t moving, but he wasn’t unconscious. He sat on his hands and knees, head bowed into the dirt, and refused to acknowledge his friend, much less the feasting thunder-monsters directly ahead. Freya scanned the vicinity for traces of the spell that hit him, but there wasn’t even a shard of grass bent the wrong way, much less burnt, and she couldn’t smell the typical coppery odor of offensive magic. She yanked him upright by the arm, but was dismayed when Zidane simply flopped the other way, turning a crossed, glossy-eyed look to the sky. His breath was short, his face was flushed and he was mumbling like a drunken dog—simply put, he looked *confused*, in the official sense.

“Gods damn it,” she cursed, realizing he wasn’t fit to go anywhere. She resolved to carry the bedazzled boy, hefting him onto her shoulders and taking off towards the rocks. Unfortunately, this maneuver was at the cost of stealth, and she hadn’t made three steps towards shelter when the air

cracked with a roar. A backwards glance confirmed her fears: one of the dragons was lowering a look straight at her, and the others swiftly caught wind of their new prey, rising to the chase.

“Oh gods!” She sped away, struggling with her inert burden as the earth started to quake beneath the tread of three hungry dragons. Their fuming, noxious breath was licking her heels as she cleared the grass and hurdled over the granite shelf, landing in an open niche before another valley filled with grass and flowers. She pressed fast to the rock wall, praying to disappear from sight, but the gods’ answer was dropped in front of her, equipped with mammoth teeth and talons.

The first grand dragon screamed in her face, the sheer sound enough to paralyze lesser creatures, and Freya scrambled out of the way of the slashing attack that followed. She wormed along the corners of boulders, seeking a foxhole, and was rewarded with a crevasse just wide and deep enough for a couple of people. Without another thought she slung Zidane through the gap and then plunged in after him, the other dragons hounding her shadow. There was a crescendo of stomping and thundering as the monsters strove to dig them out with claws and

electric bolts, but the crescent roof of the hole-in-the-rock deflected their assault.

Eventually the frustrated roars and thunder spells simmered down, the siege settled into an uneasy standstill, and Freya at last remembered to breathe. It took a minute to piece together her bearings, upside-down and crammed between jagged rocks as she was, and her heart was still racing as she squirmed and shoved her way to a reasonable position.

It was a terrible spot; there was no room to swing her polearm or even lie down flat, and just a few feet above was a slit that exposed the sky and some snooping dragon snouts. Zidane was slouched against the other side of their cubby hole, looking ruffled and out of breath, even though *she* was the one who had just done all the running.

“Gods, what now?” Freya breathed, though at the rate the fates were blessing her today, she wondered why she bothered asking them.

Her companion began to stir, blinking bleary, unfocused eyes while dregs of words spilled off his daft tongue. “Mmugh… mmehn…”

Freya frowned and held a steadying hand to his neck. His pulse was wild. She considered the spell that struck him, drawing from her limited knowledge of the monsters under Master Gizamaluke's charge. There was something unique about lamias, she was warned ages ago, though what was it, again…?

"Muhnuh… mma… auhm…" Her touch seemed to revitalize him, and Zidane shuffled closer, pawing at the clasps of her raincoat and burying his face in her shoulder. Before Freya knew how to object, he wrapped his legs around hers and began to smother her with an unexpected rush of vigor, his panting taking on a thick, sultry edge. "Ah… ah…"

"What in…?" Freya muttered, almost as disoriented as he, and the more she tried to guess what the Genome was aiming for, the less she liked the answer. The heated contact rose to a steady rhythm, his hips rocking against hers, and once Freya realized that the thing poking her thigh was definitely not one of his daggers, her fur bristled savagely.

"Ugh! *Get off!!*" She cuffed him on the ear with an open hand.

Zidane fell back, knocking his head on the rocks, and the boy clutched his hair in muddled pain. "Ah!

Argh… ugh?”

“What?” Freya spat, losing patience with his dumb manner. “Say something intelligent!”

He looked up, cloudy expression finally evaporating, though the feverish glaze to his eyes lingered. “…Freya?” he squeaked, as if only now noticing her.

“Yes, you fool! What are you doing??” she reproached him, breathless with outrage.

“Erm… ah? I dun… uh?” He furrowed his brow, helplessly stuck and stumped, and though all his blundering preached innocent confusion, Freya noticed the unsubtle hand reaching under his belt, as if of its own accord.

She shook him aggressively. “Hello?? What’s gotten into you?!”

“Ah, ahh!” He threw both hands up in surrender. After several slow blinks, an actual sentence congealed. “Er… you tell me. I don’t know, I… last I remember was that lamia, and then… ohh…” He doubled over with a groan. “Oh gods… I’m so hard I can’t think straight.”

“What??” Freya squawked, torn between not hearing correctly and not wanting to hear correctly. Suddenly his condition made terrible sense, and though she long forgot the technical name of the spell, Freya knew what poets and other writers with sick senses of humor called it. “Oh for the love of—it’s an eros spell!”

“A whuh?”

“It’s a special ability of the lamias. It overwhelms weak-minded males like you, and turns them into sex-addled loons. Since you’re already a pubescent moron, it just made a pre-existing condition worse.”

“Bwuh??”

“Exactly.” She offered her hands to the heavens, exasperated. “Great, and now I’m pinned in this gods-forsaken gopher hole with you.”

“Uhm… cure?” he feebly entreated.

“There isn’t one. It lasts until either you come to your senses or…” Freya’s ear twitched irritably at the alternative. “Well the other option isn’t happening, so you’d better snap out of it before I knock it out of you.”

Zidane seemed to take her threat seriously enough, dragging himself back to an upright position and inching as far away from the dragon knight as possible. “So what are we… doing here?” the flustered teenager eventually had the mind to ask.

She glowered and uttered succinctly, “Grand dragons.”

His eyes widened anxiously. “Where??”

Freya pointed to their skylight, and Zidane warily stood up and climbed to the top of the hole, peering over the brim. With a yelp he dropped from the perch and covered his head, a set of eager claws chasing him down. They cowered together until the dragon resigned its post with a snort, retreating back to watchful obscurity.

Zidane’s whisper was saturated with awe. “… There’re grand dragons up there!”

She could have slapped him. “Thank you, Captain of the Obvious. That’s what I just said!”

“Geez, I didn’t expect it to be like this!”

She wasn’t sure if he was referring to a minute ago or an hour ago, but her resentment was well

placed either way. “When I said there are grand dragons up here, what in the six blue hells did you expect?!”

He shrugged defensively. “I dunno! I was thinking like, we would run around until we found one, and then we’d kill it, and then we’d go find another one, and then we’d kill it! I thought they were supposed to be solitary monsters, like big cats or something! I didn’t think a whole goddamn pack —flock—whatever of them would swoop down on us!”

“What did you think, they were all just going to line up one at a time for the slaughter?! You are an *impeccable idiot*.”

His face screwed up in a childish scowl. “Yeah well who’s stupider, the idiot or the idiot who follows the first idiot without saying anything?”

Freya reared onto her haunches, raising her voice with her temper. “*I did say*—”

A lightning bolt broke her rebuttal, sending the dragon knight squealing and scuffling to the bottom of the hollow. The spell showered the two with sparks and dust as it uselessly skittered overhead,

the scouring noise mingling with the growls of their stalkers.

While Freya's ears were still ringing, Zidane said brashly, "Aw, we can handle it! There's only three of 'em. One for each of us, and one to grow on."

"Oh shut up, you simpleton," she snapped, thundered into fetal submission. "We don't stand a chance."

The two stewed in that cold fact for several minutes, neither daring another peek outside. Freya wrinkled her nose with another dismal thought. "Grand dragon venom is notoriously lethal. We're lucky they aren't using their poisonous breath to choke us to death."

"They're probably smarter than that," the body squished beside her reasoned. "They wanna flush us out before they kill and eat us."

"Wonderful," she said, watching a pebble dribble off the nose of her helmet.

The hours stretched uncomfortably underground. The stone walls were numbingly hard, her death-stained stockings were turning sour, her side felt

bruised and raw, and by the time violet hues began to tinge the blue sky, her legs and hips were tired of propping up her body. There was nowhere in the steep, wedged crawlspace to actually sit down, and the dragons relentlessly patrolled the entrance, their grizzly murmurs and shuffling footsteps tolling bells to the Burmecian's sensitive ears. An impatient thunder spell would once in a while rattle their cage, just when Freya was on the verge of dozing off, so even that slight reprieve was denied her. If she was going to be imprisoned like this much longer, she thought bitterly, she might give up and throw herself into the reaper's maw—at least the dragons her clan so worshipped would get some satisfaction from it.

Zidane hardly weathered any better. Usually he was a wellspring of crazy ideas and escape plans, even if half of them wouldn't work in a million years, but now he was disconcertingly withdrawn. He would occasionally shift from one slippery stance to another with a plaintive little noise, his breath going in fits and shudders. Freya couldn't tell if he was sick or sorry, though she gave him the benefit of the doubt and refrained from smacking his fidgeting hands away from his waistband.

The silence was eventually broken by his strange, low, creaking voice. "Mmm… Say, while we're

stuck down here…" His fingertips trailed past her knee and up her leg, teasing the muscular cords beneath, and Freya was put off by his dopey, half-lidded smile. "…You wanna fool around?"

She seized his wayward hand, about to break it at the wrist. "How could you possibly be up for that nonsense at a time like this? You are despicable."

Zidane lolled back with a tremulous sigh. "I dunno, I just… ever since that lamia hit me with that *thing*, I don't feel right. It stinks, we're starving, we've been cramped in here for hours, and I am *miserably horny*. If I could get at least one thing off my plate, that would be awesome."

"Is this how you sweet-talk all the ladies?" she censured him.

He wouldn't look at her straight, and it was the foggy, bewitched film over his eyes that worried and infuriated her the most. "Aww… Com'on Freya, be a pal. Help a guy out."

"Friends don't ask for such favors!"

"Sex buddies do," he naturally retorted.

"For Reis's sake, no!" she railed at him, fed up with the entire predicament. "I don't care what that

lamia did to you, I am not helping you gratify your perverse little itch. Don't you dare think for a second that I'm not injured and miserable myself, you selfish, obstinate, foolhardy, incorrigible, pumpkin-headed little lech! If not for you we wouldn't be stuck in here! I have no sympathy what-so-ever." She pounded the opposite wall with her fist, punctuating the rant, and Zidane sank even further into the crevasse.

After an abashed while the boy spoke again, indignantly, "…I have a pumpkin head?"

She turned a mean lip up and away from him. Maybe the pumpkin part was a bit much—but she meant the rest, and she wasn't about to take any of it back.

Zidane cast a gloomy look at his crotch, slander already forgotten. "Can I at least give myself a hand?"

She scoffed. "Directly in my presence? I think not. You've some gall, even asking."

He whimpered and went back to picking thorns and stickers out of his clothes, while Freya went back to brooding and listening to the dragons. They were restless, the swish of grass and crunch of

gravel marking their obvious prowling. Curse them, what was the point of their tireless menacing?? If they were truly hungry, they could have rounded up a plethora of other creatures to eat in the time they've wasted camping some rocky burrow. Surely a scrawny, armor-clad piece of meat such as herself couldn't be *that* appetizing.

She knew not the motives of grand dragons, however, and even if they were simply the subjects of a cat's game, it made no difference. The dragons proved they weren't going to lose interest any time soon, and there was nothing the cornered dragon knight could do.

"Freeeeeya…" And Zidane was *not* helping.

"What?"

"Please…"

"Please what??" she replied testily.

"You know…" The lewd quirk of his eyebrows left little question of his intent.

"I already said no! Are you deaf or stupid?!"

"I gave you time to reconsider."

“Reconsider *this*, you…!” She thrust her heel remorselessly into his groin, but enough of his reflexes were intact to block it, so she settled for generally battering him until he cried mercy.

“Ow, ah, okay, gods, never mind, I’ll stop!”

Freya pulled back, waiting for an apology, and he shrugged through it, voice hoarse with desperation. “I’m sorry, it’s just, you know, I’m dyin’ here. It’s never felt this bad before.”

“Irony hurts, doesn’t it?” she belted back, not in a gracious mood.

Zidane narrowed a look at her that was probably meant to be pointed, but in his disheveled state it only made him look queasy. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” she smartly dressed him down. “I just think it’s appropriate for someone who thinks of virtually nothing but sex to get a taste of his own medicine, for a change.”

This finally struck a nerve in the single-minded boy, and his features sharpened to an acerbic glare. “You think I deserve this?? I am laughing all the way to the morgue, let me tell you!”

“Well good,” she fired back, duly belligerent, “Because that’s exactly where we’re headed now, no thanks to you!”

“Yeah, well… fine!” The master of non-sequitur crossed his arms and threw his gaze into a corner.

“*Fine*.” Freya likewise shut him out.

They sulked while daylight slipped away and stars sprinkled the greater moon’s palette of soporific blues, like metallic paint on the canvas of the gods. The two did an impressive job of sitting at odds, considering there was barely enough room to turn their backs. They waited for the night’s chill to set in and discourage their pursuers, but the dragons remained constantly within earshot. Though Freya could discern snoring from the beasts, the last time she surfaced to investigate, it was merely a ruse. If the dragon knight weren’t as agile as the namesake, she would have lost her head.

As it happened, Freya had nothing left but time to think.

If it was going to boil down to a contest of patience, stamina, reflexes or even hunger, the dragons were going to win, she was certain. The whelps of the basin could reportedly survive for

weeks without nourishment and stay alert for days on end; in the case of adult grand dragons, those figures could be amplified threefold. Freya, on the other hand, hardly believed she could last another day, and even if she could, it was a not a limit she wanted to put to the test. If there was a way to distract the fiends long enough to run across the plains, through the woods and back to the grotto without them catching up, she wished she could devise it. Challenging them directly was inconceivable; despite Zidane's boasting, they weren't skilled enough to slay three of the monsters at once, and Freya had severe reservations about defeating even one. If only the others were here…

As the minutes and hours whittled away, the final recourse was the first and last thing on her mind since the whole ordeal began: death.

Did she want to die here? Of course not. She would sooner fight and face the inevitable than waste away in a hole. A dragon knight knew how to meet one's fate with honor, if nothing else. It would be a terrible shame, still, to perish on some uninhabited plateau while the rest of her comrades awaited her return—more practically speaking, she and Zidane were the ones last piloting their airship. If something happened to them, the others would be

virtually stranded. She couldn't afford to let them down, not when the war between their worlds was finally nearing its climax.

However… if she were to die here, she wouldn't want a grudge to follow, not even on the one largely responsible for her demise. Besides, after getting mired in such bleak thoughts, any conversation at all would have been preferable to the oppressive silence she was enduring now.

"Zidane… Are you awake?" It was a lame query; he was right in front of her, and though his eyes were closed in the slanted moonlight, his squirming and irregular breathing indicated he was far from rest. He answered like a sick cow, with a strangled groan that died on a pitiful note, and she arched her brow, wondering.

Was that some kind of joke? Was he brushing her off? There was no way he was still sweltering under that eros spell… right? That happened just after lunch, which was what, seven, eight hours ago? Maybe more. That was surely enough time to work it out of his system (even if she wouldn't let him do it *manually*.) Was it something else, then? They were both beyond uncomfortable, but was he seriously hurt, or just being melodramatic?

There was only one way to find out. “Are you still…?” she pried, unable to finish the question without a disgusted grimace.

“*Yes*,” he said raggedly, loudly and with absolutely no hesitation. His voice was cracked, bordering on pain, and he wouldn’t yet look at her or even open his eyes. Freya got the impression that if he did, she would see the lamia’s tears.

Though she was loath to touch him again, she reached over and checked his pulse once more. “Tch, you’re sweating like a hog!” was her only remarkable observation.

“Y-Yeah.” His skin was teeming with unnatural fire, and he could scarcely hold enough breath to speak; he seemed legitimately ill. She had no idea a spell like that could be so potent, but then again, the lamia itself was extraordinarily for its kind.

Freya gave a smoldering sigh, shaking her head at the sadistic fates. She was vexed with the boy, sure, but she wasn’t heartless. She couldn’t let him suffer the whole night.

Ultimately, it was too damn late and she was too damn tired to quibble over such things as dignity and decency.

“Oh, *fuck it*.”

“Wha-?” She could imagine Zidane’s astonishment. Though she was adept at cursing *him*, cursing outright was a rare and drastic feat of her character. Profanity was typically beneath her tastes, but there was nothing appropriate about what she was about to unleash, anyway.

“Do whatever you have to do,” she tersely expounded, “Just don’t touch me with it, you understand?”

Zidane spent three whole seconds regarding her with the most bemused expression she had ever seen on a human being, and then without another word he got up and busy. He clambered for a stance that would face away from her, yet the best he could manage was leaning his back against her arm. She shut her eyes, grit her teeth and endured him, so long as he kept his hands to himself.

This he did well, belt falling slack at his side in a hurry, and for a minute all she could hear was hitched, labored respiration and the rustle of clothing. He then fell into the habitual motions, and even through their layers of clothes she could feel tense, shifting muscles all the way up his spine. What Freya didn’t anticipate, however, was the

furry, rogue tendril slipping under her coat and wrapping thrice around her thigh, too delicate to notice amidst all the heat and friction.

She could tell when he reached his peak by his high, hiccupping cry and his tail's abrupt constriction, strong enough to make her yelp. She hissed and pushed aside the skirt of her coat, uncovering the intruder. "Zidane, your godsdamn tail!"

The boy was a little too far gone to catch her meaning right away. He slid away and hugged the wall, drinking long, sated breaths and fumbling absent-mindedly with his belt. It gradually occurred to him to wipe his hand on a nearby rock. "Uhm… uh?"

"Your tail," she clarified sternly. "Get it off before I cut it off."

He twisted a glance her way and grinned sheepishly, a blush coloring his complexion brightly enough to be evident in the cool light. "…Heh. Has a mind of its own." He released her leg, the fuzzy coils unraveling like rope.

She clucked dismissively. "Anyway, are you quite done?"

His answer wasn't encouraging, nor the way he wouldn't quit rummaging through his trousers. "Ah, I… I think so… Argh…" He passed her a strained look. "Hand me a potion, will ya?"

She lifted a skeptical eyebrow and reached into the pouch at her side, producing a small vial. "You really think drinking a potion will help?"

"Who said anything about drinking it?"

"What are you—?" He snatched the potion and unceremoniously poured it down the front of his pants. "Oh for gods' sake, Zidane!"

"Oh yeah…" he purred, slumping into a corner. "That hits the spot."

"You sick little…" She gruffly took back the empty vial and stared critically at his shadow-rumpled figure. The wasted potion left a damp, reddish, trailing blot on the blue fabric around his legs. "Congratulations. You look like you just bloody soiled yourself."

"Don't give a crap, my lady," he quipped haughtily.

Freya resignedly threw the vial down a crack in the rock and reclined on her elbows. "Tch, men. I

swear, it's as if you are all incapable of surviving without sex."

"I think we are!" he concurred.

"Well, I'm glad you're happy. We're still going to die horribly down here, you realize," she flatly remarked.

"Mmm-hmm." Zidane stretched his arms over his head and yawned. "You should relax, babe. We're gonna be here a while."

"The nerve of you!" she sniffed, but Freya was too relieved to hear the usual pitch in his voice to take any further umbrage.

One of the dragons sneezed, a ghastly reminder, and they ran out of things to say. Another hour passed in silence, though this one was slightly more accommodating than the last. Freya caught herself trembling at the joints, though whether it was from the creeping cold, the marathon of holding herself up, or stress in general, she could not ascertain.

'Fratley, if I don't make it out of this…' She sighed again, her eyes stinging with hopelessness.

The defeated little sound stirred her companion. "Oh, hey…" Zidane wiggled closer, reaching around

her shoulder. Before she knew better, she was draped in a lazy hug. “Thanks,” he murmured drowsily under her ear, and proceeded to fall asleep in her lap.

“Hey!” she protested, albeit solely for the sake of it, as she lacked the willpower to push him away. Even though he reeked of sweat, half-baked sex and spilled potion, he was warm and soft enough to make an alluring pillow, and Freya was just desperate enough to take advantage of that. She passed her weight from the wall to the boy, returning the gesture, and her legs throbbed and tingled gratefully for the chance to relax. Once she finally let go and leaned on him, it was easy to… to…

“Hey, you can’t just… go to sleep on…”

Freya dozed off.

The gods only knew how long she was asleep, but the night was ripe when the dragons made their move. The pair awoke to some scratchy, muttering commotion overhead, the monsters’ star-glittered silhouettes peeling across their narrow window. Freya watched them crowd overhead and grumble in odd, particular tones, almost like speech. Then one

of the lot squatted over the hole, its bulk obscuring the moon and shrouding the two in darkness.

Zidane's brow furrowed with consternation. "What are they doing…?"

Freya couldn't say, but the shadowy pall was stifling already, a heady, mildew-like scent permeating her nostrils. Did the dragons mean to suffocate them, or…?

She just got the mind to take her lance and thrust it straight up into the overhanging brute when it crashed on their heads like a sack of bricks: a gyser of scalding fluid, so hard, fast and pervasive that the two were flattened against the walls of the fissure like wet socks, stunned. The torrent lasted for nearly half a minute, and Freya was positive they were both going to drown, but it finally trickled to a stop, the dragon lifting up and away.

Freya opened her senses, gasping and gawking in the steaming dark. They were now steeped in some kind of… warm liquid… that wasn't apparently caustic… but it rather smelled, reeked, *stank* of—

"Sons of bitches pissed on us!!" Zidane screamed, and when this realization struck Freya a second later, she realized exactly which end of the

dragon she was about to stab. She was frozen, sputtering in shock. It was *piss*. It was vile, gross, rotten, humiliating, abominable, and *all over her*, seeping through her clothes and matting her fur with the worst filth she could imagine. The fumes alone were nauseating—never, ever in her *life*…

"Oh, that is *it*," her companion snarled wrathfully, a crazed expression carved on his face and a thread of spectral fire dancing on flourishing hackles. There was a burst of bright, raw, unfettered magic and it was that simple: he Tranced.

Freya had witnessed Trance transform her friends in amazing ways. Dagger became a golden goddess. Eiko became an angel. Amarant became a figment of the dark.

Zidane became a beast. She had seen his Trance before, but never in such close quarters. He was usually a fleeting blur on the battlefield, his arsenal of bizarre spells eclipsing his transfigured form, but now she could make out the tufts of electric pink fur that swallowed his garments and framed his visage with a burning lion's mane. He had gnarled, clawed hands and slitted eyes cut from sapphires and boiled in brimstone. His every hair and curve was wicked and primal, tail thrashing like a torama's whisker,

breath seething through pointed teeth and small chest heaving with rage.

When he spoke, she couldn't even hear Zidane—his voice was demonically distorted, as if the boy she knew were shouting from the back of a line of bloodthirsty panthers. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get out of here."

Freya raised her hand automatically, seeking her polearm, and that was when she noticed the ethereal smoke wafting off her knuckles. She waved her arm experimentally, watching it leave a hazy after-image, and when she grasped that sparkling sensation in her gut, the power of her very soul engulfed her. The light was exhilarating, opiating, new and ancient and surreal—bone turned to flesh, turned to skin, turned to fur, turned to scales, turned to horns and claws and back again. She knew this light, alien to her waking hours and yet familiar to her dreams, as if it were her bedfellow all along.

She didn't know what she was now, but she was Tranced, and that knowledge was good enough.

Zidane grinned like a devil, and Freya nodded back. They were going to hurt some dragons. "… Let's go."

Moguta, Mogmi and their litter of moogles were roused from their beds early that morning. The babies gathered around the chimney of their makeshift dwelling, their tiny, squinty eyes monitoring the soot-covered shape lumbering down the shaft. While they speculated over whether it was man, moogle or beast, the parents fretted and listened closely to the anomaly's encroaching utterances.

The first distinct sentence to reach them was, "This has been the most disgusting experience of my life. We are never speaking of it again, do you hear me?"

The moogle couple exchanged perplexed shrugs, and their children shrieked and tumbled out of the way as the mystery guest leapt down to the floor, its surprisingly nimble legs absorbing the shock with nary a sound. It rose unsteadily and trudged forward, a spindly-limbed, blonde-haired bundle hanging off its shoulders.

Moguta bounced on his knobbed feet, suddenly recognizing the pair. "Oh, oh, oh, you're those crazy people from yesterday! You're alive! Kupo!"

Mogmi gasped at the wretched sight they made. “Goodness, what happened? Are you two all right?”

The dragon knight’s hands and frazzled hair were dyed a shade to match her tattered red coat, and she puffed and spit as she dumped her witless luggage onto one of the straw mats in the corner. The blonde boy lay there in a comatose heap, smeared with a jungle’s worth of dirt and scratches.

Freya stood by him for a moment, swaying on her feet, before finally dredging up some words for the moogles. “We’re fine. Just exhausted.”

Mogmi flitted around the room, herding her scattered children away from the visitors. “From what?”

“Trance.”

Mogmi seemed impressed. “Kupo! Are you serious? How did that happen?” Moguta pinched the shiny bulb of his nose. “And what’s that awful smell??”

“Grand dragon urine.”

The moogles were fazed to silence. Freya bowed towards the ground with a wry smirk, unsure if she

was going to laugh because she was funny, they were funny, or she was just mad.

“I believe that answers both questions. Now, if you’ll excuse me… I shall be joining him.”

Gravity answered for her. She collapsed on the spot and didn’t wake up until the next day.

“Uh, Freya… You’re not gonna want to hear this…”

“What?”

“We’ve gotta go back up there.”

“What for??”

“…I left my daggers.”

A/N: Phew, that was a doozy. Anyway, as a reward(?) for making it to the end of this chapter, here’s some bonus material! Brought to you by #icybrian.

Myshu: Do you think FF healing potions taste good or bitter? Also would it feel good or burn like

mineral ice if poured on one’s penis?
Myshu: (this is relevant I swear?)
Angahith: I assume it might feel good, in a tingly way!
Mozz: medicine always tastes like shit
Mozz: i would imagine anything as miraculously powerful as potions seem to be
Mozz: would have to taste particularly nasty
Hermit: I think the weaker ones are probably flavored like cough syrup
Hermit: and like elixirs would go down like burning tar
Mozz: i’m also imagining would sting like a motherfucker if applied locally
Mozz: but it would of course mend the flesh it was stinging the fuck out of
Mozz: so it’d be like bacardi 151 going down the throat and iodine if splashed on the skin
Mozz: is basically what i’m sayin.
Myshu: Very astute observations, chat
*** Myshu notes**
Hermit: Not sure about like, the status cures and such
Hermit: at least the stuff that one assumes would be ingested
Hermit: Lesson one in Balamb Kindergarten: Don’t eat Gold Needles.

Mozz: Gold Needles are applied anally
Mozz: it's very inconvenient
Mozz: but then, so is being turned to stone.
Hermit: Oh man now I'm wondering if like cure potions have to be applied as enemas
Angahith: I bet they have to, in SOME fics
*** Angahith shifty eyes Myshu**
Myshu: grk
Myshu: NO medical anal
Angahith: (it's an open secret you like buttsex) :(
Mozz: Cloud "cures" Cid of Petrification status. oneshot R&R plz no flamz
Donraj: Some D&D novels actually go into this!
Donraj: (It varies)
Donraj: I think my favorite take is "Tastes good, healing process is incredibly painful"
Myshu: Och

7. The Bath

Zidane had no trouble admitting it: he was more than a little infatuated with Dagger. He was hoping his persistent advances would make that obvious, though even up until now, months after the "kidnapping" began, she regarded him at the best times with mutual trust and the worst with mild annoyance. It was really hard to tell if he was getting anywhere at all with the princess, especially in such war-torn circumstances as they faced now.

Still, there were some moments… There were times when their bond was something stronger than friends or teammates, but not quite… the next thing. There were times when he could have her in his arms and it felt like they were the only two people in the whole world, though neither knew how to say so without breaking the spell. The connection was often as fleeting as it was difficult to articulate.

Nonetheless, she was more frank with him these days, and wasn't afraid to speak her concerns: over her kingdom, her friends, her eidolons, her concealed past and her precipitous future. He could listen to her talk all day; he loved her kind, open

mind and gentle voice. He loved everything about her.

But was he in…? And did she…?

A mockingbird chirped shrilly a few feet from his head, jarring his reverie. It flitted between the spidery branches, inspected him with a cocked fish-eye and then dived back into the bright afternoon sky. Zidane rolled his shoulders, stretched his legs and leaned back into the crook of his treetop perch, shrugging off the unsettling emotions.

Oh well. He wasn't here today to analyze the next Queen of Alexandria's feelings for him. That could be saved for later.

Shamelessly enough, today he was here to analyze her body.

He cracked a bawdy grin just thinking about it. Her Highness had a fantastic figure, somehow petite and shapely at once, with an amazing posterior and perfectly framed breasts, not too big or too small (there was nothing wrong with big bouncy boobs on any occasion, but there was an even greater aesthetic beauty to breasts that fit *just right*.)

Although thinking back, the very first thing that attracted him to Princess Garnet (which he would

never admit in any manly setting) was her pretty, heart-shaped face and full, round eyes, their dark fire more captivating than the gemstone itself. Not that there was much else for eye-candy at the time; the rest of the princess was shrouded in a white mage's robe and hood. Her greater assets he was privileged to later, in stages—some things more than skin-deep—and the more he saw, the more enamored of her he became. She was a woman of layers, to be studied one piece at a time, like a priceless artefact. This made her very special, he understood—nothing like the other girls he had encountered before. That was what he liked most about her, really. In that light, he had to reconsider his approach. If Dagger was no ordinary girl, his ordinary girl-catching tricks weren't going to work.

Perhaps he was missing something.

Short of borrowing one of Blank's "love potions," he was at a loss. He didn't know how to turn her favor for sure, and Zidane wouldn't dare force her into anything she wasn't ready for—he would rather die, honestly. He couldn't help his lascivious nature, though, and there was nothing in his moral contract that prohibited him from getting a free show.

After all… what she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, right?

His tree overlooked the bank of a wide, lazy stream, and beyond were plains that sloped like a tired, old sea into the hazy horizon. Above was a boundless cerulean dome, unblemished by a single cloud, and crickets and oglops made sport in the suntanned grasses while the wind took a holiday. It was a blessing to find a place like this, an oasis in a desert of Mist, so the troupe gladly stopped here for lunch.

The lady-folk elected to take a bath while the others prepared a meal, and that was when Zidane took his cue. He announced he was going to patrol for monsters and briskly took off before anyone could question his motives. With a thief’s speed and stealth he cut a circuitous course to the stream, discovered a perfect eavesdropping tree and nested in it. He estimated a ten-minute hike from the campsite, if the girls took the leisurely path, and that left plenty of time to erase his tracks and secure the bough with the best view of the water and most cover from foliage. Now all that was left to do was wait while the sun played golden, silent notes on the tree’s leafy keys.

He distractedly watched an ant get lost on one of the little green spades. It had to have been longer than ten minutes by now. Where were they? Dagger had explicitly mentioned the river, and this spot was the best break in the rock-strewn path between the shore and the camp. It wouldn't make sense to go any other way. He spun a peek around the backside of the trunk, sharp eyes scouring the trail. Not a—oh wait, someone was coming! He saw the high grass bow to someone's passage and slipped back into hiding.

A minute later the visitor arrived, in flagrant red coat and distressingly by herself. She padded up to the rim of the stream, bare toes sinking in the mud, and examined its clean, languid flow. Out past the tree's dappled umbrella, pebbles glistened in copper tones in the shallow heart of the riverbed.

He waited and listened, but when the approach of more was not forthcoming, Zidane pursed his brow, nonplussed. *'…Freya? Where's everyone else? What happened to Dagger?'*

Not about to notice him, much less answer, Freya went about her business, laying a towel over a dry rock and her helmet next to it. Her coat of arms was next, followed by raincoat, stockings, blouse and

breeches. As she undressed below, the Genome grew anxious. What now? He didn't want to stick around if he wasn't going to see Dagger, but he couldn't jump down and get away without the dragon knight catching him. Any sudden movement was going to betray him, so unless he wanted to explain what he was doing up there, he had no choice but to sit tight and wait for Freya to leave.

'Ah, geez.' He rolled his eyes skyward. It couldn't be Dagger, alone and intimate by the water. No, this had to be his luck. His tail twitched with a rogue thought.

So… should he watch, anyway?

He was already going to hell for this; he might as well. Besides, he was curious. He never had a solid grasp of Freya's figure—in his mind, that is. She'd certainly never permit his hands there, though that was irrelevant because he honestly wasn't interested, and any jokes he made to the contrary were simply that (he had a reputation to maintain, after all!)

The least he'd ever seen her wearing was a bouffant sleeping garment, the cut of which left way too much to the imagination. Freya was too practical to parade her shape like Dagger in her snug orange overalls, and Zidane could respect the sentiment,

even if he didn’t relate to it. She wasn’t here to look nice; she was here to kick some ass. That’s what knights were for, and every piece of her attire was geared towards protection and battle, hardly an inch left vulnerable. The only piece that wasn’t had been rudely taken away, and Zidane felt especially sorry for it. That ribbon was a nice little touch, in retrospect; it showed there was more to her character than the business of being a dragon knight.

Seeing her character naked would fill in a blank page of his mental scrapbook, that’s for sure, but that didn’t make it a good idea. Despite certain… compromising situations they’d been in before, it was just too weird to picture the dragon knight in any context outside of comrade and friend.

Curiosity, however, was a drug too potent to resist. The lady knight shucked off her knickers last, daintily kicking them to the side, and then stepped into the water.

Zidane’s mouth went suddenly and alarmingly dry.

He wasn’t sure what he was expecting—probably something a lot more like… well, like a mouse. Mice were stocky, amorphous bundles of fur, wholesomely unappealing. It was a ridiculous

image, considering he knew better. He had seen the Cleyran dancers in their skimpy silks and bells, their builds undeniably feminine, but there was some short circuit in his brain that prevented him from making the connection to Freya.

His intrigued gaze rode up her bony, elongated ankles, past the knotted meat of her calves and into the cusp of her thighs, precisely where she stopped being a rat and started being a woman. Short slate hairs did nothing to blur the supple curve of her buttocks, and hips subtly gave in to lean backside and well-rounded shoulders, which her hair settled over in sleek, snowy spines. She continued in slow, fluid strides to the center of the stream, water lapping enticingly around her waist and her finicky tail curled high out of the way.

Freya dipped face-first into the stream and then gracefully pulled back up, diamond drops scattering before her like Shiva’s halo. She cringed with a tiny sneeze and then plunged again, acquiring a taste for the water’s crisp temperature. There wasn’t much room to sink, so for a while she paddled idly in the soothing current, long muzzle and ears held up in the air. Her tail wagged behind like a snake, hypnotically slicing through dips and ripples. She

didn’t turn up a single splash, as naturally poised in the water as she was on the ground or in the air.

Zidane blinked, that simple, involuntary motion startling him. He hadn’t remembered to breathe. Air returned to him in a quiet rush, and he shook his swimming head. What was he just thinking about? He didn’t want to see Freya in the buff, right, because, because…

His thought was mercilessly snuffed out when she stood and faced his direction, wet hair flung behind her in a silvery cascade. He went completely numb, jaw hanging open—a nudge one way or the other would have tipped him flat out of the tree, like a capsizing boat.

That the lady had breasts didn’t surprise him; Zidane knew that already. It was a biological fact: female Burmecians had boobs. He even had an inkling of how big they were supposed to be, though that didn’t prepare him for the way they balanced pertly on her slender rack, pale fur underscoring her plumy, rich dark nipples with soft, luxurious frost. She began to wade back to shore, and he avidly noted that they even swayed like regular breasts, yet were as fuzzy and exotic as winter fruit.

Zidane swallowed his cotton tongue and tightened his tail around the branch beneath him, grappling for composure. “Down boy…” he coached himself in a coarse whisper. “This isn’t even the right fare. Do not hit this target—I repeat, do not hit.” The faux military jargon unwound him a bit, keeping him grounded to the tree. Amazingly, he had enough presence of mind not to look any further south, lest he lose his grip for good.

Freya scrubbed herself thoroughly with the towel, banishing any lingering filth, and then reclaimed her wardrobe. She hummed an easygoing tune as she dressed, taking her lackadaisical time, and this alone was fascinating. Who would have thought a cold bath could lighten the solemn dragon knight’s heart?

Once she donned the helmet she transformed back to normal, all prim and proper again, and Freya shook her damp heels at the stream and walked away. Just before passing his tree she stopped and spoke, staring levelly at the distant camp even as her voice lifted into the canopy.

“If you’re looking for Dagger…” There was a dreadful pause, and the boy’s eyes bulged and hair bristled as he waited on the patronizing ring in Freya’s voice to confirm his fears.

“She and Eiko found a hot spring on the way here and decided to bathe there instead. It was just a little too caloric for my tastes.” Not sparing a glance back, she took her leave of him, strolling away with a wry chuckle. “Sorry to disappoint you, monkey boy.”

A smart retort failing him, he nervelessly watched her disappear into the brush, stranded in his own discomfited musings. He wasn’t—he couldn’t—Burmecians were *not* his type, really. Well, maybe if—but—no, *not* Freya. No way. If anyone else had pulled that over him, he would be humiliated, and the gods forbid Dagger find out! He would never recover from *that.*

But, since it *was* Freya… he didn’t know what to think. All he knew was the ruffled fur at the base of his tail and the heat thrumming under his shirt like a rash, and when words at last surfaced he surprised himself, stammering to the leaves and birds.

“N… Not at all.”

8. Self Esteem

Recommended reading:…um.

I was gonna suggest a very fine one-shot that I was reminded of while writing this, but as it happens I haven't the slightest clue of author or title. So I wasn't able to find it—good job, myumemory. Basically, it's Freya and Amarant having a nice little chat outdoors, except he's hiding in the grass or under a rock or something the whole time and Freya can't tell where his voice is coming from. See, now I sound crazy. It could be ancient or it could be fetus-old, knowing my powers of recall, but if I'm not hallucinating and this fic exists, I hope someone else remembers it for me—I've been itching to read it again.

edit: It's "Parlor Tricks" by Wallwalker, and I had such a tough time finding it because it's on FicWad. Heh, whooops. Go read it anyway!

Gaia's two moons sailed across opposing horizons, polarizing the world red and blue. The mountains blushed like coals, the fields shimmered

like the sea, and legions of stars lay between, their numbers diluted on the battlefield of the two worlds. On the surface, humanity slept through the peaceful dark, oblivious.

It was Freya's turn at the night watch, and she tended it alone while the others slumbered. Though their four tents had room for seven and one more, Amarant, as usual, made himself the odd man out. Freya wondered if the brutish bounty hunter ever slept, or if he was a moon-cursed demon that roamed the hills after dark and fed on the dreams of the innocent, just like in children's fables. Wherever he lost himself, he always turned up in the morning, so it was fair not to ask any questions—no one *really* wanted to know.

She prodded the dying campfire with a stick, turning over the last log and roiling the hot ashes like a mound of seething ants. The firewood crackled for a mesmerizing while before Freya sighed and meandered around the camp, keeping alert so long as she kept on her feet.

Pacing did nothing to slake her wandering mind, however, and it wasn't long before thoughts of her duty towards her sleeping comrades segued into thoughts of her duty towards her people and

homeland. As a dragon knight, what should she be doing now? What could she be doing better? She recalled standing at the gates of Burmecia not terribly long ago and asking herself, ‘What can I do for my kingdom?’ as if the answer could resolve her purpose and give her life meaning.

She only found ruins. Perhaps she had taken the wrong path. Perhaps that was all she and Fratley had in common: a few too many wrong turns. Even the nourishing hope of finding her other half, a dream she had quested after for five years, had been torched and stamped into cinders the moment he turned his back and said he was sorry. Now, all she had left—the only reason to move on—was to redeem herself to a fallen kingdom and a forgetful partner. All she had left were these people under her watch, one for all and all for one on their mission to defeat Kuja, and whether they would march together into absolution or damnation mattered not. She would defend them with her life, because they *were* her life.

She sniffed at such mawkish consolation. How clinging and desperate she had become! Perhaps she was always that way, and the trait only lay naked and pathetic in her mind once all her futile longings had been stripped away. This, she reminded herself,

was why she hated being left alone with her thoughts. They made her feel weak, almost sick.

Still, she would give anything to know what *he* was thinking, since it was apparently never of *her*…

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Freya’s shoulders bunched into knots, every fiber from head to tail cringing at the intrusive voice. She leveled her composure in the next breath and turned in a circle, realizing she had been pacing off a tangent, away from the camp and into a wide clearing. The tall grass swamped her legs, ticking and humming with crickets. Standing in her trodden path was Zidane, stooped slightly forward with his hands clasped behind his back and his tail arched over his head, like a housecat prying into a pie on the windowsill.

“It’s you,” Freya muttered irritably, though she wasn’t sure why. It was as if the gods summoned him to distract her.

Undaunted by her weary tone, he straightened and threw his arms out amicably. “Ta-dah, it’s me. I was looking for you!”

“Were you, now?”

“Yeah. I was thinking you might wanna switch out—get some shut-eye, you know? You’ve been out here a while.”

“I’m quite fine,” she insisted, perhaps too curtly for her own good. “You can go back to sleep.”

“You sure?” He swung an open look around the muted countryside before taking a step closer. “Well, since I’ve got you alone, I’ve been meaning to ask…”

His cautious approach dawned on her, and she imagined the question before it arrived. He was probably stumped over a certain incident at the river earlier that day, but Freya wasn’t inclined to explain herself, much less account for his bad behavior. She had expected the boy’s humiliation to fill in the blanks without her, but Freya should have known better—Zidane was unacquainted with shame. He only had enough tact not to bring it up in front of the rest of the party, lest he incriminate himself.

“Ah, gee, where to begin…?” He shuffled his feet and scratched his head, affecting bashfulness. Freya would not be gulled, though she was too involved in his petty problem to brush him away, now. “Listen, about what happened this afternoon—”

Freya clipped his anxiety before it took flight. “Don’t worry, I have no intention of telling Dagger or the others.”

He blinked, taken aback. His blank alarm then shifted into uneasy acknowledgement. “Oh. Well yeah, that’s good, thanks. But, uh…”

What else? She had hoped that gesture would pacify him, but apparently something more had driven him from his tent, and if Freya judged him correctly, he wouldn’t tire until his curiosity was satisfied. “What? Spit it out.”

“It’s just… why? I’m really confused; you usually don’t let me get away with stuff like this. What’s the catch?”

She shook her head, exasperated. “Why does there have to be a catch? I’m not your mother; I can’t keep up with all the rotten fruits of your horrible upbringing. Why should I try to get you into trouble when you do a fair enough job of it on your own?”

He glanced aside, absorbing the scolding with a sour wince. “Gee, thanks.” Though it was in his best interest to walk away, he stalled in the following silence, consternation skittering over his features.

His fingers twitched and his tail corkscrewed behind his ankles, and after an unbecoming bout of thought he pursued his original query. “I just mean, you know, I saw you, and you know you, uh… didn’t seem very upset about it…”

Freya’s frown deepened, tugging on her brow. She had no solution for his benighted guilt, or for the vexing froth at the brim of her stomach. The air was suddenly stagnant and oppressive, and a restless ache nipped at her calves, spurring her to run and jump far away. She didn’t know where she was going, though, or what she was running from—was she really annoyed with Zidane, or tired of herself? Freya turned away, seeking a different light, though the red moon’s embrace was hardly more comforting than the blue’s. She hated this feeling, this stifling night, this urge to fly to the nearest moon and hunker in a crater until the world blows away, these awful not-questions with no answers—she hated this monkey standing where she wanted to see a strapping dragon knight, a rock to hold on to amidst the rapids—and now more than ever she hated her selfish whimsy.

Reason clashed with loathing, the vile mixture bubbling up her throat, and words were scalding her tongue before she knew what she was talking about.

“Why should I be? You should be apologizing to Dagger for even attempting that perverted little stunt, not me. Besides, I think having to watch me bathe instead was punishment enough.”

Zidane started, notably disarmed, and asked guilelessly, “What do you mean by that?”

Freya scowled. Did he have to ask? Was he really so dense? “I shouldn’t have to explain. I know how unseemly Burmecians appear to other races.”

It was funnier at the time, she had to admit. She wanted to ruin his little game, and while she was buying time for Dagger to finish her bath and move along, Freya figured it wouldn’t hurt to put on a show. She had her modesty, of course, but she didn’t harbor any delusions about her appearance, either. Her travels abroad granted a rash impression of her own kind, reviled as “nasty rat people” by foul mouths in taverns across the globe. It was safe to assume, then, that if anything could rattle Zidane’s uncouth libido, it would be a wet, naked rat lady.

What she didn’t count on was the hurt crease to the boy’s brow as he objected, “Wait, are you saying I think Burmecians are ugly? Or you? You’ve got me all wrong! I thought you knew me better than that, Freya.”

“I just caught you trying to spy on the next queen of Alexandria in the bath. What did I miss?”

“Ouch. Okay yeah, I’m a sleaze, but I’m not *that* shallow, and I definitely don’t think you’re an eyesore. Couldn’t be further from the truth, honestly.”

Freya bristled. What was he saying? Was this another game? Was this some glib appeal to her buried vanity, to win her pardon? What in the world *did* he want at this point, anyway? “Don’t toy with me.”

He recoiled from her vitriol, palms outstretched in surrender. “I’m not! Geez, I’ve never seen a chick get so worked up over almost getting a compliment.”

She had something snappish aimed at the boy, but it stuck to the roof of her mouth when she saw his expression fall, cat-like eyes keen and staid in the lurid dark. “…No one’s ever told you that before, have they?”

“Told me what?” she replied rigidly, discomposed by the perceptive drop in his tone.

“That you’re beautiful.”

He said it with such blunt, quiet sincerity that it stopped Freya in her tracks. The night paused awkwardly, crickets and frogs quarreling in the stultified breeze.

Zidane read her delay as a negative. “That’s a ‘no,’ huh? Not even your boyfriend?”

There he went, calling Sir Fratley her “boyfriend” again. The term never sat well with Freya, as if such a thing were beneath a dragon knight’s station—too ordinary, too *common*. “Our relationship was too… complex for such shallow flattery,” she said kindly, surprising herself with her own voice.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Every guy tells his girl she looks hot once in a while.”

“Not all guys have to be wench-farmers like you, you know! Sir Fratley was a gentleman,” she corrected him. How could she possibly explain the concept of chivalry to such a freewheeling scoundrel? A quaint example surfaced in her mind, like one of so many drab, oily paintings left to soak and rot in the halls of Burmecia Palace. “We weren’t… it was different. We were partners. We trained together every day in the castle courtyard, after the other soldiers had cleared the grounds. It was our special time. He was always firm and

encouraging, and he was always strong for me. He lauded my skills, even though his techniques put mine to shame."

The boy cocked a strange, bemused smirk and threaded his thumbs through the loops of his belt, playing with imaginary pockets. "Just your skills? You've got other assets, y'know. I saw them myself. They're jiggly."

Furious heat rose to her cheeks, and she had to check herself against drawing her lance. "Zidane!!"

"What??"

"If you really want it, I *will* punish you," Freya menaced, hoping the grave boom in her tone would enforce the threat.

He frantically waved the notion away, even as his face split with a teasing grin. "No no no, that's okay!" He cupped his chin with a belated thought. "Hey, how did you know I was up there, any—"

"I could smell you." She touched her sloping rodent nose. "You can't put anything past this, I'm afraid."

The dirty blonde pouted. "Hey! You trying to say I stink?"

She tipped her muzzle and said airily, “A bath certainly wouldn’t kill you, that’s for sure.”

Zidane tittered and idly flexed his arms, the snub rolling off his shoulders—he rarely seemed to take insult to anything. “Maybe I should have joined you, then!”

Nor could he take anything seriously. “Hrmph! I can’t believe you.”

“Aww, well…” Zidane mellowed, sidling closer until he stood in Freya’s crimson shadow. On closer inspection he didn’t really smell terrible, just like fresh dirt, old denim, chocobo musk and… cookies, for some reason. The red and blue twilight played violet tricks in his pale hair and clear eyes, and when he spoke again it sounded too warm and straight for the cool, wiry boy.

“Listen, if he’s never going to tell you, I will. I think you’re gorgeous. You can take it from me; I’m like a babe connoisseur. And if anyone ever says any different I’ll personally go and punch ’em in the face, because there’s no way they could be any more wrong. It’s the truth, and it’s practically killing me that you don’t believe it yourself.”

Freya's breath froze, crystallizing a precious supply of blood to her head. She knew better—she wanted to know better—she wanted to say she knew better. It was just more of Zidane's blithe chatter. He was always tossing out encouraging words to keep up the group's morale. It didn't matter if what he said was true or not, and it didn't matter that the boy always spoke before he thought, even if the consequences were unfortunate. It didn't matter if she believed him or not, because she was a dragon knight and dragon knights weren't supposed to *care* about such things, what the world thought of Burmecians be damned, and old flames be damned, and wicked, vain men be damned, and herself be damned if she…

…realized she actually did care, perhaps a little.

She hated trying to think around Zidane.

Freya could have said any of those things, but when the night songs simmered down and they were left staring at one another, all that came forth was a very faint and desultory, "You should be getting back to your tent. The hour is late."

Zidane shrank a bit, gaze falling to the wayside. "Oh… okay." He nearly looked as if he had been struck, and she heard him swallow thickly before

testing his volume again. “Yeah, sure. I guess I’ll see you in the morning.” He then picked up his light-hearted bearings and ambled away, tail dragging through the grass like a roving weed.

He didn’t look back, and she didn’t say goodnight. She couldn’t say anything. She wondered how an observation on something so trivial as her *looks* could stupefy her so thoroughly that she lost her manners. Only once she was alone with her usual, sober thoughts was the reason manifest: no one had ever told her before, after all.

She told herself it didn’t matter, even if she really cared.

The dragon knight patrolled the tranquil field, studying the heavens, nursing her lance and meditating on her duties, just as she was before the interruption. Any silly, indulgent musings were quickly dismissed, though long after her watch concluded and it was time to rest, Freya never rid herself of that peculiar, ticklish sensation in the pit of her belly.

She didn’t sleep much that night.

9. Alcohol and Tail

A/N: Yeah, like the… like the song.

…I'm sorry.

It's funny-sometimes you should go with your first instinct. Way back in chapter three I cut out a flashback between Blank and Zidane because I figured it wasn't relevant enough to the chapter at hand, and now I wish I had left it, because it's about to become very relevant to chapter ten. I went back and put it in, but now I feel silly for leaving it out in the first place. Ah well, hopefully not too big a deal. Thanks always to those who read and review!

Anyway, on to new stuff. Remember the warnings for chapter six? Yeah, it's about to get even worse.

Recommended (if irrelevant) reading: "Diary of Zidane Tribal" by The Tiny Pea (SakuraRibbons). *Not to be read with a straight face.* It's a quick, easy read, and if you're a fan of zany, immature parody, you'll probably get a good chuckle out of it.

edit 5/29/10: Never too late for a slight revision-language can be picky business.

(“Get off my *back*, rat!”)

The dwarves called it Grogfest.

(“Not until you give it back!”)

Though unorthodox, it surprised no one that the rustic, bibulous, revelry-loving dwarves of Conde Petie had a holiday dedicated solely to their favorite brew, gysahl grog.

(“Ow! Goddamnit, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!”)

The three-day celebration (“Two tae have fun, an’ one tae clean up aftae!”) was at its peak when the queen’s company passed by, intrigued by the noisy festivities. Though originally drawn to the fireworks (which were contributed by friendly Black Mages), the group was persuaded to stay the night by Zidane, who asserted that they could all use a good excuse to relax and have fun.

Everyone complied reluctantly-Eiko, for one, was afraid of being recognized by the village watchmen. However, as they approached the front gate and witnessed the doorman tumbling down the steep earthen ramp, his head lodged in a wooden keg, the

Genome flatly assured the little summoner, “I… wouldn’t worry about it.”

The arboreal village was an upheaved mess, partly due to the boisterous party and largely due to recent tremors along the roots that supported its freakish architecture. Bricks had been knocked free and strewn along corridors twisted to nearly impassable angles, stairways had crumbled, shops had collapsed and entire walls had been replaced by either an avalanche of vines or thin air. If one stood in the central gallery and looked through the open roof, it appeared as if a massive, verdant hawk had nested upon the town, Iifa’s taloned roots sinking into the mortar while its branches unfurled into the heavens like wings.

Since the Mist’s return, the group of adventurers had found similar handiwork all over Gaia, so the disheveled village was not a shocking sight. Unlike the rest of world, however, the dwarves considered the mayhem a blessing from the gods, bringing their revered “Sanctuary” closer to home (this belief was bolstered by the fact that the centerpiece of their chapel, the Kirkboat, was miraculously unscathed.) The misguided sentiment was disconcerting and hopeful at once-at least some people could still see light through the Mist.

“Ootsiders” who recalled the village’s original condition agreed, anyway: Iifa couldn’t make the place look *worse*.

The eight travelers paid for some lodgings in the top northeast corner, above the rabble in the plaza. They then dispersed to partake of the festival’s customs, each in their own way. Quina tore into the banquet, hir obscenely long tongue polishing the tablecloth before anyone had the chance to inform hir that embroidered grapes don’t taste like real ones. Vivi explored the grounds, tripping over every pothole. Dagger followed his lead a little more carefully, Steiner dutifully in tow, while Eiko preferred to stay hidden.

Zidane, however, went straight to the source of the party: the tables passing out free mugs of grog. Gysahl grog wasn’t the most palatable beverage in the world (the dwarves preferred to say that, despite its chief ingredient, ‘Nae even a chocobo kin stomach it!’) but it did mellow the nerves the way any fine beer should-as well as a few other faculties.

He was on his third pint and rather giddy by the time Dagger rejoined him, just in time for another round of cards with a pair of locals: Robert Dogherder and Mr. 482. Though Her Highness was

easily badgered into a game, her bodyguard remained leery of the tailed boy's ebullience, and his protests over the act of gambling were obnoxiously forthright.

It was Robert who finally turned the tables, shifting a brusque look from Dagger to Zidane and objecting, "Oi, why're ye lettin' yer wife take sae mooch wind from this ol' tin bag?"

"H-His wife?" Steiner screeched, thunderstruck, while the bride in question turned an unholy shade of red. Zidane could have blown the situation over if he weren't seized with hysterical, braying laughter, and Dagger's stammering excuses were hardly adequate. Luckily Vivi showed up to the rescue, pacifying the knight with a simple, innocent explanation. The party resumed while Steiner stood down, at heel though not at rest.

"An' thin last year, Ah dared Willie tae jump the canyon in a barrel," Robert regaled his fellow card-players with tales of previous Grogfests.

Mr. 482 squeamishly adjusted the brim of his hat, fanning himself with the cards in his other hand. "Goodness, sounds dangerous. Did he really do it?"

“Aye, the drunk bastard fell for it! Literally, Ah suppose. Dunnae worry, he survived. Sortae.”

Their game took place in a cozy parlour beneath a stairwell, where moonlight poured in through a broken corner and mixed agreeably with a string of floral lamps. Everyone parked on frilly cushions around a squat table, the festival’s bawdy murmurs filling an unseen background while Zidane eagerly laid down the rules of “spider poker” to the newcomers.

Dagger seemed to genuinely appreciate the lesson, and that always gave him a little thrill-teaching her something new (and maybe impressing her with his “worldly” knowledge!) He monitored her progress with a player’s shrewd eye, sometimes admiring a little more than her game. He even fancied that her occasional, quaint blushes and coy glances were owed to more than embarrassment over losing a hand, and when he reached close to offer pointers, he could swear she…

Well, maybe it was just the grog giving him notions, but Dagger didn’t object once, and Zidane secretly delighted in every second near her. All the same, Vivi was more interested in conversation with Mr. 482, and the way Steiner kept staring

malignantly at Zidane's drink made it look like he was trying to poison it *with his eyes.*

Fed up at length with the knight's brooding, the boy admonished, "Rusty, you seriously need to lighten up, just this once. In fact, I double-dog *dare* you to have a pint."

Steiner scoffed, "Hrmph! Your childish tricks won't sway me from my post! Only a dog would take such a dare!"

At that declaration, Robert's gullet swelled and his eyes bugged out, like a perturbed frog. Lime spittle jetted across the table as he spewed in the knight's direction, "Ach! Are ye disrespectin' the spirit o' the brew?"

Dagger dropped her soiled cards while the others recoiled from the outburst, though before Steiner could recover from his faux pas, a shrill cry chilled the room. Everyone stopped and tipped wide, startled looks to the ceiling, straining to decipher the source.

("You, you big, red snake! Snake-headed… scoundrel! I'll see to it you lose more than that if you don't give it back!")

Mr. 482 soberly enquired, “Oh my. Was that one of your friends?”

“It sounded like Freya…” Dagger whispered. The clatter of footsteps and glass from the room above punctuated her observation, followed by a harpy’s medley of insults.

(“…immoral, boorish, blue-arsed baboon! You fecking arsehole!”)

Zidane winced. “I’ve never heard Freya sound like *that*.”

Gritty baritone answered the abuse. (“So help me gods, woman, if you touch my hair again—”)

(“You’ll what, Coral? Flash your big ugly mug at me?”)

(“That’s it. Downstairs. Now.”)

(“Noooo! Put me down, you brute! I’ll get-you-stop it!”)

(“Ow! Let go, you crazy bitch!”)

(“I’ll crazy you… ow! Quit-you-ahhhh!”)

“Och! A domestic!” Robert belted with inapt excitement; the cryptic expression garnered a few

confused blinks from the white and black mages around him. Meanwhile the scuffle escalated to a din, wood clapping and grating over limestone as heavy objects-possibly furniture-were batted about like toys in a typhoon.

Vivi huddled behind Zidane. “W-What’s going on? I’m scared…”

The Genome stared fecklessly at the bricks overhead, his slack-jawed consolation no help to anyone. “Me too, Vivi. Me too.”

No one had the sense to get up and assess the quarrel, much less intervene, before a red-cloaked blur was hurled into the room, like an angel cast down from on high. It landed on a gnoll-skinned rug, skinny arms and legs churning the air like an overturned ladybug. A familiar face eventually bolted upright, long hair scattered before a wild, growling visage and ears folded to insane degrees. Freya snorted once, clearing her equilibrium, and then pitched a nasty glare back up the stairs, to the large man looming in the shadows.

“For the last time,” Amarant boomed quietly, his voice that of a dark, old, tired god. “I don’t know where your stupid hat is. Why don’t you harass the monkey about it? *He’s* the goddamn thief.”

Zidane jumped in his seat, slighted more by the burden than the accusation. “Hey, don’t drag me into this!”

Before he had to answer for anything, Amarant was gone. Dagger swiftly attended Freya’s side, her magic subtly scanning for damage. “Are you all right?”

Freya clumsily swung an arm towards the girl, urging her away. “I’m bloody *fine*, that stupid, miserable…” Her curses fizzled out as she staggered up and fixed her coat.

“Geez, are you sure?” Zidane tested, though he instantly regretted drawing attention to himself. Vivi scurried out of her path as Freya plodded to the table and leaned over the Genome’s ear, beseeching with vitriolic sweetness, “Zidaaane, have you seen my helmet? I do believe a certain red-headed, no-good charlatan has purloined it.”

Zidane ducked out of her clutches, gagging over the acute stench of alcohol. “Wow, you are very, very drunk. Why don’t you go lie down and maybe it’ll turn up in the morning?”

The inebriated dragon knight backed off, seeming to heed him, though her parting shot as she toddled

down the opposite staircase was, “Fine, but it won’t be my fault when *someone* gets… hurt… themself.”

Astounded by the dramatic, uncharacteristic display, the room was bereft of comment until Vivi tugged on one of the Genome’s cuffs. “Zidane, I’m tired…”

“Hmm? You wanna go to bed already?”

A sleepy nod confirmed it, and the other players forfeited their cards and grog with similar apologies. Thus stymied, Zidane rolled to his feet and ushered the child-mage along. “Oh, all right… I’ll help you find a bed, okay? Off we go.”

The amount of grog Zidane had consumed didn’t really sink in until he was attempting the stairs to their rooms-suddenly they were a lot less straight and short than he remembered. The halls were paved with rubble and sandstone lit merely by moonbeams, making the trek even more difficult, though Vivi exhibited saintly patience as he followed Zidane with tiny, hesitant steps.

The headstrong Genome wasn’t going to admit he was impaired at all, until he stumbled over an obtuse block and skidded three steps backwards before

catching the wall and his bearings. “Ah, son of a-! Damnit… I meant to do that.”

Vivi crouched next to him, appraising his bruised shin and shambling manner with a fretful crinkle to his eyes. “Are you drunk?” he asked with his usual, quiet honesty, stirring Zidane’s latent scruples.

“Uh… maybe,” his pride yielded to the very astute nine-year-old.

Vivi shook his head, wondering, “Why do grown-ups drink that stuff…?”

“Ah, why?” The blonde scratched his head and looked for his feet, working back towards the top of the stairs. “Oh, I don’t-well? It’s just fun, Vivi. Makes some people have a, uh, good feelin’-puts ’em in a good mood-whoops, gotta watch my step. Anyway, all the best parties have beer.”

He then directed a sour, sidelong look at an invisible target. “It’s just some people don’t know how to pull the cork out of their ass and have a good time withou—” A low-hanging dwarven doorframe broke his tirade, knocking him upside the head. “Ah! Gods, damn it…!” He listed dangerously, about to plunge down the way he came, but Vivi quickly yanked him to safe ground.

“Woo… okay.” Zidane rubbed the fresh knot under his bangs and proffered a lame smile, trying to sound reassuring. “Ahaha, I’m cool. Totally gonna… probably feel that in the morning.”

Not convinced, Vivi pressed, “Are you okay?”

He waited for the hallway to quit rolling like a tide-racked boat before responding. “Yeah, just… had a bit too much, I guess. No problem. I’ve gotten way, way more shit-faced than this before-ask Blank.” Zidane squinted through the dark, spotting a shaft of soporific light before a distant, open door. A place to rest wasn’t far now, though just to be safe…

“Hmm, gimmie your hand, Vivi.” Anxious little fingers obediently twined around his own, and Zidane squeezed them with a droll chuckle as they moved on. “Heh. Maybe you should help tuck *me* in bed.”

Though slumber came easily for Vivi, a vague, restless thrum in his veins drove Zidane back downstairs within the hour. He was feeling much lighter and spryer as the night wore on, and he couldn’t decide if he was looking for more games, more drink or more trouble in general-he simply figured one would buy the rest.

He crept down some more stairs, ones buried behind a wall in a fashion that reminded him of the secret passages around Alexandria Castle. They made him feel like he was illicitly sneaking around-always a fun pastime for a bandit-and he wondered if Eiko had ever employed them when stealing food from the village. Zidane eventually stopped at an odd break in the wall, compelled to spy on the rooms beyond (reconnaissance was important to a master thief!) It was a small, jagged vent that intersected the floor, and when he peered below he found…

"…Quina?"

A surprisingly speedy, pale, apron-clad blob was barreling across a bridge, decked in sundry fruit and vegetables. A pair of dwarves hounded the Qu, their words harried and garbled (though decidedly profane), while Quina raved with obscene intent and volume, "I REQUIRE MORE YUMMY-YUMMIES!"

"Okay, that's a little scary…" Zidane remarked out loud, and then another event crossed his attention, in the room on top.

"Don't Ah make a foin pyntie-hat?"

A couple of dwarves turned towards the speaker, who donned a suspicious cap with a flourish. Zidane hunched over the peephole, angling for a better look. “Hey, isn’t that…?”

“Tha’s nae pyntie-hat! It’s awl th’ wrong shaip n’ colah! It’s mair like soom brand o’ helm!”

“Feuch, whar’d ye nick that thing froom? Straight awf a dragon’s scalp, looks it.”

“Ach, Ah foond it! ‘twas jes lyin’ aroon’!” The dwarf pedaled backwards as he justified his claim, and that was when Zidane got a clear view of the headgear, its tapering, crimson crown affixed with a pair of miniature dragon wings.

“Hey!” Zidane squirmed through the skinny opening. The dwarves, catching sight of the intruder, simply raised their mugs in greeting. “Ah, rally-ho!”

“Rally-ho, stranger!”

“Rally-ho, floor moonkeh!”

Picking himself up from the graceless entrance, Zidane grimaced, dusted off his pants and accosted the group. “Ugh, yeah, rally-whore. Hey, do you guys mind if I take that helmet back? It belongs to my friend.”

The matron of the lot whirled to the offending dwarf. “So ye did nick it!”

“No, Ah swear!”

“Ye’re a roottin’ liar!”

Robert, a witless audience to the dispute, belched merrily, “Och! A domestic!”

The woman gruffly snatched the helmet off the imposter ’pyntie-hat’s head and passed it to Zidane. “’ere ye go, lad.”

“Thanks.” The Genome took it and abandoned the scene as quickly as possible. The dwarves raised their mugs to him once more in farewell.

“Cheers!”

“Happy Grogfest!”

“Och!”

Zidane didn’t have much trouble finding the helmet’s owner; she was already in her room, a few doors down the hall from Vivi’s. A thin cloth curtain was fastened over the threshold for privacy, timorous candlelight lapping at its frayed hem. He stalked towards the doorway, sampling the sticky Grogfest atmosphere for signs of trouble. His drink-

addled senses were too dim for his own good, however, and he was already committed to carrying out the perilous delivery.

The only thing that made him hesitate was the loud, wailing voice behind the curtain.

“I dun care what *he* thinks!” It was Freya. Her slurred, abrasive words suggested she was still drunk, though it was the shaken, injured quality to her tone that unnerved him even more. Although he couldn’t see through the curtain, his ears also picked out rustling fabric, jingling buckles, a slamming drawer and a stifled sob. “…not good ’nuff to remember, so be it.”

“Freya…?” Zidane sidled into the room, waving the helmet before him like a white flag. As he glanced around the quarters, several portentous details buzzed on the fringe of his mind: the dreary, inadequate illumination cast by two estranged candles; the oozing puddle under a shattered vase; the prevalent scent of grog; the linens tossed haphazardly over the floor, and the disquieting lack of company for the lamenting dragon knight.

Freya was perched on a tree stump the dwarves had carved for a chair, her armor dismantled around her feet. She spun towards him, right eye narrowing

into focus while the left was veiled by a swath of fine, silvery hair. For a bleary second she looked near of kin to Beatrix, though the facade fell to pieces the moment she stood up and blurted, “Ah! You!” like a spitting cobra.

Zidane braced for an attack, wary of what the dragon knight could do in such a state, though Freya’s venomous countenance dissolved into relief once she realized her helmet was being returned. “Oh, you did find it. How *gracious* of you,” she drawled with an ungainly curtsy, and the boy noticed two things awry at once: her coat was unclasped.

And she was naked under it.

There was probably some kind of perverse logic behind this, but Zidane really didn’t want to dwell on it. He stood dumbfounded while Freya swiped the helmet from his frozen fingers, sniffed it once and then immediately discarded it. She didn’t seem to mind the indecency, much less the draught, and an awkward situation advanced into a calamitous one as she lurched forward and shoved Zidane into the corner, one outstretched arm barring his exit and the other pinning his shoulder to the wall.

“H-Hey!” he yelped, overwhelmed by the undressed dame. Freya leaned oppressively close,

the lush, pruinose hairs of her bosom grazing his nose as her husky whisper shot sparks down his tail. “I want to thank you *proper*…”

Zidane’s thoughts scrambled. ‘*Boobs boobs boobs right there in my face hooooly shit man I could lick one of those nipples they’re so close and fuzzy I wonder if they taste like peaches oh man what the hell’s going on this is trouble, this is bad. Boobs belong to Freya, no touchie.’*

“Uh, no, that’s okay, really, I’ll just-it’s-I gotta go now,” he eventually stammered, distressed by the carnal electricity. He direly wished he could push her off or even divert his gaze from the nectarean buttons peeking beneath the flaps of her coat, but it just *wasn’t happening*.

To make matters worse, she wasn’t listening. “Com’ere, you, you…” Her speech evaporated into dregs of longing as she roved his body, pawing his clothes and combing his hair.

‘She’s so drunk she doesn’t even know who I am,’ he thought fleetly, and he wasn’t sure whether to feel horrified or sorry for her. One hand kneaded his side, roiling the fermenting juices in his belly, while the other untied his collar and massaged his neck, firm pads and claws tangling in the tender hairs

along his nape. An astringent shiver loosened the muscles from his bones while tightening his loins, and he sagged against the wall with a moan.

'Oh gods, please don't get up for this,' he petitioned the fates and his own unsavoury urges. Something was egregiously wrong here, and he had to snap Freya out of it, before it was too late.

Before she-before they—

There was only a flash of fur and teeth and a gasp wide enough to penetrate, and before he knew better he was marveling at how long and virile Freya's tongue was. The dragon lady breathed grog down his throat like a disease, its fever draining all the cool, rational blood from his brain while she strangled him with an ill-fitting kiss, too tall and sharp for the small, smooth Genome. Never before in Zidane's life did a kiss feel like an ambush-a battle he was losing-and he wondered where Burmecians taught their knights how to do *that*.

He wasn't sure if he was about to die of shock, suffocation, alcohol poisoning-by-proxy or all of the above, but eventually she let him drink some real air. "I… whuh…" He feebly tried to form a sentence, some adept reaction, an excuse, an apology-anything at all, really, it was way past his turn to speak-but

unfortunately the siren in his head screeching, ‘*Say something, you idiot!’* was not forthcoming with suggestions.

He finally uttered, hopelessly, breathlessly, the taste of her yet tingling on his lips, “I am so confused right now.”

Freya took that as a cue, drawing him in and nibbling on his collarbone, and he writhed under her prickly, blind affection. One hand played a titillating chord at the base of his tail while the other cupped his groin roughly, claws biting through the suddenly taut fabric, and he squeaked so loudly it was a wonder no one overheard outside (hopefully not, since that wasn’t exactly the most manly reaction.) Pain and arousal congealed in his throat, nearly choking him, and when she seized his hand and planted it on one of her breasts, filling his palm with warm, supple, kitten-soft flesh, Zidane instantly forgot what he was supposed to be doing. He was helpless to resist, supine reflexes trailing his fingers over the sleek fur and learning her slender, lithe shape by touch.

She was so close and hot and *real* that he could hardly tell her pulse apart from his own. Soon all he could cling to were starved, primal thoughts, torn

between *‘this is a sexy beast and I want inside’* and, and… what was the other side of the argument, again?

Freya continued to lead him by the reins, unraveling his belt a little more deftly than he’d normally credit a drunk woman, and her gravelly purr resonated over the pounding in his ears. “Mmm, you’re a big boy now, huh?” Zidane couldn’t tell if she was making fun of him or *what*, but he was about to lose it. Her hand dipped inside his pants, feeling him out and taking him in, and his knees would have given out completely if she weren’t holding him up by his-*oh dear* ***gods***

“Freya!” he screamed, every last, pathetic fiber of willpower steeling his composure.

She withdrew her errant hands and leaned back, granting him precious room to think, though her hips still rocked into his with distracting persistence. His tail beat a skittish tattoo against the wall as he wrestled down the impulse to thrust into her coaxing cadence, and the boy swallowed, a potent spirit burning his stomach. He was worse than drunk. *They* were worse than drunk, and his voice was faster than his mind, words desperately running away without him.

“Oh, geez… As much as I actually kinda really want to right now…” *What was he saying?* “…I can’t do this.”

She tilted a strange, reserved look at him, her brow draped in the shadows of sickly candles. The midnight glow smeared her eyes with golden-black oil and Mist, like the cogs of an old, worn-down engine, and he almost imagined them leaking. “Why?”

Why? There was probably a multitude of very good reasons, but every one slipped out of his grasp, like scrambling for purchase on thin ice. He nearly convinced himself that there was nothing wrong with two drunk, horny people coming together in the middle of the night, if only he let it happen, but none of this was in his control-or hers-and maybe that’s what bothered him the most. Maybe he couldn’t figure out if she was taking advantage of him or *he* was taking advantage of *her*, but there was only one sure way not to feel like a total bastard in the morning, and that was if he… because he couldn’t… because…

“Because I… it’s just, I… Dagger…”

Because of Dagger. There, he realized, out of the blue, he actually said it. Out of the unmentionable

fathoms of his heart, he'd said what he could hardly even think: he was saving himself for Dagger. He'd never saved himself *any* trouble when it came to sex before-if he could get it, he got it, pesky social hiccups (like, say, friendship) be damned. The epiphany stunned them both into silence, and at that moment he arrived at the hard truth: he was in love.

He was in deep trouble.

He wilted on the spot, suddenly feeling as green as the liquor he'd been imbibing all night. "…I think I'm gonna be sick."

Zidane got the impression that was the wrong thing to say. Freya cracked a grisly expression, nostrils flared and eyes fiery like opals, and there was something darker in her savage grip and surly sneer that he couldn't put his finger on until it was too late.

Rejection.

"Oh*geddout*," was the last thing he heard as she took him by the scruff and tossed him outside with enough force to tear down the curtain. It fell over the Genome like an absurd net. Freya stormed out of sight, leaving the stripped door as it was, and then everything was quiet and lonesome.

His sanity recurred to him in wretched pieces, and Zidane crawled onto his hands and knees, manhood hurting like a kicked puppy. “Shut up, I know…” he groaned, cradling the heavy ache in his trousers. He only wished this was the first conversation like this he’s had with his… anyway.

He shrugged the curtain off, secured his belt and surveyed the hallway; no one else was around. Good. He didn’t know how much more embarrassment he could take tonight.

‘Well, that was a disaster. Nice going, Zidane.’ The boy sighed, more defeated than ever, and limped away.

Zidane didn’t quite remember passing out on the floor at the foot of some random bed-while sitting up, no less-but he awoke that morning beneath a big, rumpled quilt, Vivi under his arm and Eiko in his lap. He roused the kids with tickles, and after a “pillow fight rematch” (he let Eiko win, too groggy to put up a contest), he sent them out to rally the others. His heart was lifted by their bright, cheery giggles, even if his head was throbbing like a drum.

He washed up in a fountain downstairs (the plumbing of the village was as mystifying as the rest of its design), the cold water clearing his mind and

reviving some very strange memories from last night. Zidane had to admit: despite the shame and trauma, it was pretty funny, in retrospect. Hilarious, really. No one would ever believe it. As he finished getting dressed he debated on whether to be a gentleman and keep the incident to himself, or to share his amusement and refresh Freya's memory over breakfast.

Well, Grogfest wasn't officially over yet. He still had time for some fun.

Zidane strolled into town, cackling to himself.

"I did *what* last night?"

10. Pillow Talk

It didn’t take a very hard look to see that something ominous was going on at the Iifa Tree.

The arborescent colossus was wreathed in Mist so thick it was nearly tangible, and from the mountain path all travelers could see was a maelstrom of virulent clouds billowing around a giant, dark mushroom. Perpetual neon dusk tainted the obscure horizon, its netherworldly palette steeped in purple shadows, though whether the foul ambiance was lit by a hellish moon or a dying sun no one could descry.

The group had intended to scour the tree the same way they had before, from ground to roots to canopy, and with any luck Kuja would be lurking somewhere along the way. No one expected this to be anything like the last time, however. They had already watched the wizard single-handedly defeat an armada, level a city and tear a whole other world asunder, so what was left? After everything was laid to ruin behind him, they didn’t know what Kuja was after anymore, and that unknown was most frightening of all.

At least a few variables were in their favor, however bleak. A fleet of warships wasn't bound to intervene (as far as anyone knew), and the Invincible was now in Garnet's possession. It wasn't viable to pilot an airship half-blind into those branches, however, so the expedition would have to go on foot.

It took a day across the desert before the anomaly that painted the landscape in blood was visible through the Mist, and by then both their destination and problem became evident: it wasn't *within* the tree—it was far above it, on heights impossible to reach hand-over-foot. At first the demonic eye nestled in the clouds was a terrifying sight, too familiar for the summoners in the party to bear. Dread allayed into anxious speculation as everyone debated the best approach to the portal over the Iifa Tree—if that's what it even was.

They inevitably concluded, "We need an airship." The next problem wasn't procuring one; Terra's greatest battleship was already at their disposal. The issue was…

"So what exactly are we going to do? Fly straight into it?"

Amarant crossed his arms and lowered a censorious look at Zidane, who simply shrugged. “Worked at the Shimmering Island, didn’t it?”

Dagger shook her head, transfixed by the unholy star in the distance. “I’m not sure this is quite the same…”

Eiko hopped in place and flapped her arms like a detained chocobo. “We’ve got to try!”

The bounty hunter was less enthusiastic. “We have no idea what that is up there. It could be a big, pink, fluffy ball of death.”

“No can eat, then?” Quina interjected. S/he was ignored out of habit.

Zidane was not deterred by the skepticism. “Whatever it is, Kuja’s gotta be behind it. It’s the only thing that makes sense. If we follow him, we’re sure to figure it out.”

The dissenting, disdainful drop in Amarant’s tone bordered on a challenge. “That’s the worst logic I’ve ever heard. I can’t tell anymore if you’re crazy or just stupid.”

Not standing for any squabbling in the ranks at this juncture, Freya jumped in. “Well we won’t get

anywhere by standing around and staring at the sky, Coral, so we might as well get back to the ship and see what we can do from there."

At this point Vivi objected in a tired whimper, "We have to walk all the way back now? It's getting late…"

Steiner cupped a hand over his eyes and panned a look across the clouds, noting the sinking indigo hues. "Master Vivi is correct. Soon it will be too dark to traverse the Mist."

Zidane ticked his tail and clicked his tongue, unable to argue with an invisible sunset. "Tch, I guess… I'd rather not camp out here, but I guess we have to. We can start heading back in the morning."

Thus the group cooked up a campsite, no one daring too far into the malevolent fog on their own. Quina helped catch and roast the nearest piece of meat with legs (that wasn't a goblin—not even Qus found goblins appetizing), and after a brisk, nerveless supper tents were pitched. Though the stretched canvas couldn't ward against the profusion of Mist, it was at least enough to blot out the ghastly view outside. The lurid globe hanging over their heads wouldn't be conductive to sleep, much less pleasant dreams, though everyone did their best to

cling to safe, normal thoughts—even if it meant clinging to their tent-mates.

(“I’m a big girl and I don’t need anyone to hold my hand, no matter how scary it looks out there! But I can see you’re still a big baby, so don’t worry kid, I’ll protect you.”)

(“What? But I’m not… Oh, never mind…”)

Freya chuckled as she overheard the children in the neighboring tent. She was almost content, armor and helm stacked in the corner while she made her bed in coat and blanket, though her companion’s fidgeting was about to muss up her tidy niche.

“Zidane, would you settle down?” she snipped.

The boy quit turning in hunched circles like a dog and threw her a perplexed, “Huh?”

She regarded his ridiculous manner with a cocked brow. “Are you all right?”

“Oh.” An impertinent grin split his muddled expression. “I’m okay.”

“You smile the most when you’re lying,” she observed curtly.

He tittered and then affected a mocking scowl, nose stuck in the air. “*I shall be fine, madam*—how’s that?”

Freya reached out with her foot and bestowed him a compulsory kick in the side, which the boy absorbed with a chortle. “Cheeky dog.”

“Woof woof,” he chimed, and stuck out his tongue. His tail reared over his head and his eyes shone like eidolon stones, inviting her to play, though Freya would not be provoked like some child at a school yard. She clucked and turned back to her flimsy bedding, letting him have the immature last word.

“Aww, you’re no fun,” he grumbled and left her alone. At least they were both in a good mood, circumstances considered. Freya would rather endure his silly banter than any sulking, especially on such a precipitous night as this. Tomorrow, after all, they would be flying headlong into…

Her tail flicked irritably. No, Freya would not think about it now. It was time to rest. She lay on her back and closed her eyes, ears swiveling at lazy attention while her mind indulged in blissful repose. Meditation was a cornerstone to the many skills Burmecian shamans taught their dragon knights, and

Freya often found recourse in its relaxing embrace. Soon sleep would cull her senses, if only—

She jerked forward with a furious start when something trod on her tail. “Ouf! What the—you clod, watch where you’re going!”

Zidane made no apologies in his clumsy crawl towards the flap of the tent. “’scuse me! I need to go clear my head.”

She furrowed her muzzle, concern ousting irritation. “Are you sure that’s wise? Our camp is swamped in Mist. It could swallow you if you stray too far.”

“Oh yeah, I can take care of myself,” he quibbled, and before she could say better the flap shut after him.

Freya wrapped back up in her blanket, refusing to pursue the careless thief. “Hrmph, stubborn fool.”

She was barely dozing by the time Zidane returned. He shuffled into place beside her and reclined on his arms with a complacent sigh. Freya peered quizzically at him through a cracked eyelid. “You’re back already? I thought you went to ‘clear your head’.”

“Mmm, I did.”

“Well that was awfully quick.”

“Heh, I used a guy trick.”

“There really isn’t much up there to clear out, is there?”

Zidane scratched himself and yawned. “Depends on which head you’re talking about, babe.”

Freya rolled over with a disgusted grunt. “Ugh, suddenly I get the picture and I don’t want it.”

“Heheheh.” He spent a second gauging her drowsy temperament before launching a banal narrative. “Hey, what’s the matter? You need a bedtime story, too? Let’s see, once upon a time…”

“Zidane…” she growled, barely humoring his teasing.

“A rat and a monkey laid down in a field…”

“Zidane!”

“…and had a very, very good night’s sleep. The end.”

“That was atrocious.”

“Mmmhmm.”

They were both asleep before the irony could hit them.

Zidane was not a light sleeper.

Once he crashed it was virtually impossible to rouse him at a decent hour, for as Blank once related to the group, the boy could sleep “like a dead bear in winter.” One would surmise that he scarcely moved all night, though the truth, Freya learned after much study on the road, was that Zidane was not a light sleeper—just a lively one. He was prone to flop around and change positions several times a night, and if he ever turned up at dawn the same way he was facing at dusk, something was probably wrong (this was indeed the case following the attack on Alexandria, when the boy spent three unflinching days in a row on the same pillow—unsurprisingly, given his injuries.)

Unfortunately for Freya, she *was* a light sleeper, and often her companion’s nighttime stirrings would rustle her out of dreams. She would usually fall right back to snoozing, any misgivings relinquished to her

subconscious, though tonight would not be usual at all.

A sickly, subtle sound rang in her ears—a hiss, as through clenched teeth. She opened her eyes and looked for the source, languidly focusing on the tailed boy through the fuzzy, accursed black light. His back was bowed stiffly, knees in the air and shoulders braced on the ground. A hand was pasted at his side where a dagger was typically sheathed, and his breath was gritted and stumbling.

This looked familiar, Freya realized. Unless he was deliberately milking sympathy (which he thankfully refrained from doing while Eiko was around, lest he get her unwarranted attention), Zidane could be painfully stubborn about—well, pain. Over the course of their journey Freya had become his hapless confidant when it came to scrapes, sprains and bruises, though he was still more inclined to put up a “manly” front and feign wellness than admit any discomfort to anyone. Sometimes Freya wanted to remark that he was too much like Amarant, aspiring to banish any weakness from his image, though the vital difference was that Zidane had to act at it, while Amarant could really pull it off. The salamander man seemed impervious to every element, even pain.

As for Zidane, Freya knew better, though the only time he let his guard down—the only time he ever showed the slightest twinge—was first thing in the morning, on that narrow bridge between vulnerable dozing and cheery consciousness. She was just never intrigued enough to ask, until now. “Do you have a problem?”

Zidane froze, suspended in that awkward position with his breath hitched in his chest as he twisted a bewildered look her way. He responded in slow, cautious deadpan, “Yeah, I’ve… got a problem with really vague questions that come out of nowhere.”

Freya shook her head and propped herself on her elbows, lending herself a better position to rephrase her question. “No, I mean, are you hurt?”

“Hmm?” He relaxed with a huff, back flush to the ground and tail swinging out from under his legs. “Oh. Uh, it’s nothing, just, ah…” He grabbed his thigh with another wince. “It’s kinda embarrassing…”

“What?”

He rubbed his nose and cast an evasive look up to the ceiling of their tent. “Well I, uh, slept on my tail wrong, and now my hips are killin’ me.”

Freya drew her lips into a long, flat line, teetering between incredulous and sympathetic. She wasn't aware that there was a "wrong" way to sleep on one's tail, and she would know, being the only other member of their party to own one. "You are kidding."

Truth be told, the long road did such things to a body, and everyone had their own method of "shaking it off" in the morning. While Freya preferred to warm up with a cup of hot tea, Zidane spent his waking routine flexing and rolling until he was limber enough to cartwheel through the whole day. Never had her mind connected this habit with the low-key grimaces and stuttering for air, but suddenly it made sense that he had to stretch the aches away.

"Heh, I wish. Happens to me a lot, actually. Man, it's the only thing I hate about camping out. I was okay with the straw and stuff I got to sleep on back at the old hideout, but it's hard to get comfy out here on the hard ground, you know?" He snickered wistfully. "I used to fight with Blank over pillows."

So, that was all. Freya hummed and lay down again, disinvested with his little dilemma. "There are no pillows here, I'm afraid."

“Yeah, too bad. Alas, I am doomed to be uncomfortable,” he glibly moped, one arm draped over his forehead.

“Can’t you just sleep on your side?” she suggested, unsure whether to sound helpful or critical; she was still boggling over the technical aspect of this foible.

“Nah, that’s not any better,” he said. ‘There is one thing that can help, but I don’t have a pillow.’ He pinned her with an artful leer. “Unless you want to volunteer…”

She didn’t trust anything Zidane said in that slick tone. “Forget it.”

“Aww. I see how it is, letting your poor friend suffer…” He sniffed, rolled onto his belly and buried his face in his arms.

“Not falling for it. Go back to sleep.”

“Spoil’sport.”

She was dreaming of hot tea—tender, delicious tea leaves, burning in a gale of cinders over a city washed with red rain and grey fire. The monotone

bricks sifted to ash and the palace crumbled with thunder and the tolling of sorrowful blue bells. Mist burned her eyes like smoke but she couldn’t scream or cry or look away…

That was when he bolted up with a harsh gasp, quick and sharp and tearing her into the present with him. He sat up while she lay paralyzed, clutching solid ground and combing her drifting brain for a single thread of reminiscence. However, by the time she realized she was awake her dream had receded to the scorched wastes of her heart. She melted into her coat with a tired sigh and raked her surroundings, gaze resting on the boy who had once again broken her sleep.

Zidane was doubled over, scrubbing his face with his hands while his tail wrapped twice around his waist in a bizarre self-hug. “Oh man…” he groaned under his breath.

“What is it?” Freya whispered, latching onto any diversion from her own ravaged dreamscape.

“Huh?” He flashed her a vaguely guilty look. “Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to wake you up. It’s nothing.”

She snorted at the dismissal. “Huh! Your nothings are awfully blatant. If you were sleeping on your tail again—”

He chuckled mirthlessly at his knees. “Haha. Nah, it was just a dream.”

“I see.” Not wanting to seem insensitive after going so far to ask in the first place, she pressed, “Do you wish to talk about it?”

“Not really…” he glumly refused. Silence seeped in with the Mist, and neither moved to speak or go back to sleep for a discomforted while.

Then Zidane said something that surprised her. “I think I get why Kuja might’ve done what he did back there, on Terra.”

She wasn’t sure which deed he was referencing, but she hardly had to ask. “Oh?”

“He was scared to die.”

The dragon knight lay still, contemplating the pall that settled over the tent. Kuja? Afraid? So what if he was? Was that supposed to excuse him? If anything, it rekindled her resentment, her claws digging into her calloused palms. How dare that

scourge—that pasty slip of a man—commit such sweeping destruction in the name of *cowardice*.

Something strange in Zidane's voice curbed her rage, however. "I just keep thinking, what would I have done if I were in his shoes? You remember what he said—that he was just like the Black Mages? He could be running out of time. I don't know if I could…" He didn't finish his thought.

Freya couldn't even begin. She hadn't considered the devil's motives beyond "what will he do next?" so it was difficult to digest such pathos for a man who had all but destroyed their homes and lives.

She couldn't yet voice her consternation, so the boy kept talking, filling the void with solemn musings. "Maybe it's not just Kuja. What if that goes for all of us Genomes? What if having a soul doesn't matter? Maybe I don't have a lot of time in this world, either." He leaned back on his hands and stared into space with thoughtful sobriety that didn't suit him. "…I wonder if this is how Vivi feels."

Despite all her melancholy, Freya had never before registered that grim idea. Zidane was one of the very few and precious constants in her life; she would look at the vivacious youth and assume he'd last forever, never giving it a second thought. He

was a sprite—boundless, resilient, stupid, invincible. Even once she learned about the Genome project, what exactly Zidane *was* and how close they all were to losing him, a comparison to the Black Mages had not occurred to her. It was heart-wrenching enough to count Vivi—poor, innocent Vivi—among those designed to "stop" like spent wind-up dolls, but now she had to contend with the impossible notion that some day—some day perhaps sooner than anyone wanted to imagine—Zidane would be gone, too.

For once in her life, the eloquent dragon knight was at a loss for words. "Zidane…"

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't seem to hear her anyway, until she gently announced, "You can have your pillow, if you like."

The boy glanced back at her, nonplussed; veered away, did a double take, and then gave a subdued laugh once he finally got the joke. "Hey now, I don't want no pity pillow."

"You'll have no pillow at all, then!" she threatened mildly, not even sure what she was offering in the first place. She just wanted to lift the ponderous weight off her stomach.

“Ah, well…” Zidane yawned and stretched across his half of the tent, slipping back into his casual nature and slaying the uneasy moment. “Thanks anyway. Let’s try to get some more sleep.”

The desert fired to life like a boiler room, Mist steaming off the parched earth as a hidden sun set the cumuli ablaze. The sultry air was first to greet Freya that morning, though before she could properly get up and dressed, she grew aware of… something heavy bearing on her middle, like a sack of grain.

When she opened her eyes she beheld a pair of feet. She twisted a weary look over her shoulder, following the legs thrown across her body until she discovered her tent-mate, snoring merrily and apparently satisfied with the arrangement.

“Oh, you little…” Freya muttered, preparing to scold the overbearing boy, though the longer she stewed under his slumbering form, the less she minded him. If not for the already stifling warmth of their tent, she would be cozy enough to go back to sleep… Nonetheless, the day had to begin eventually.

Freya shoved her blanket aside, and Zidane with it. A furry limb wiggled out from the discarded heap of boy and linen and curled like a scorpion's tail, the only sign that Zidane was agitated by the jostle. "Mmm," he purred. "I slept great. I'm gonna use you for a pillow more often."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

He inertly tumbled backwards, shedding the blanket and getting oriented while Freya assembled her costume. "I had a sexy dream," he drawled while scratching his rump.

"I'm not listening."

He elaborated anyway, his sleep-drugged countenance smeared with a lewd grin. "Heh, she flipped me over and milked me like a prize cow."

"*Disgusting*."

The party departed for the Invincible after a cursory breakfast, grateful enough not to have their night's rest interrupted by dracozombies or mistodons (although they did encounter two of each on the route back.) Though the trail was dangerous and the skies worse, a sense of optimism bonded the

group, keeping their conversation lighter than the Mist that mired their progress.

“Hey, Freya?”

However, something was bothering him, holding him back. He called her out during a lull in their hike, and Freya slowed her pace, allowing some distance from the rest of the group while Zidane caught up.

“What is it?”

He spoke with close, hushed confidence, an uncharacteristically troubled slant to his wide, honest eyes. “Just, what you said last night… Did you really mean that? That I smile more because I’m lying?”

She recoiled a notch, struck by the question. Freya barely recalled the remark—she hadn’t thought much when she said it and didn’t know why he’d think much of it now, especially when he’d brushed off greater blows to his ego with hardly a wink. It was rather as if he were genuinely grieved by her off-handed comment and wanted her reassurance. Why?

It was so sincere and not like him at all that it was going to bother her for a great while afterwards, but

for the time being she was so charmed to see him ruffled by what she thought of him—Zidane of all people, who professedly never gave a damn what anyone thought of him—that Freya was almost speechless.

She smiled herself, just a little. “No.”

11. Memory Lane

Recommended reading: Ayrith's "Sum of Memories," because it's a fantastic Freya-centric collection of drabbles that are insightful on an awe-inducing level. It deserves more attention. (It also has a charming little scene between Freya and Zidane, so I could not resist.)

Zidane said that Garland called it "a place of memories," though Freya couldn't say which was stranger: that such a realm could exist suspended on the vestiges of reality, or that they were getting this information second-hand from a man who was supposed to be lying dead at the bottom of another planet. It was easier to buy an explanation from Amarant, who grumbled under his breath that "the damn monkey finally lost his marbles," though sanity was a precious commodity in such a chaotic environment, and Freya preferred to believe everyone's wits intact. If they lost Zidane now, after everything…

It was strenuous enough when Dagger lost her voice, with everyone trying to safeguard Her Majesty from her own clouded, oft-absent mind. If she hadn’t fortunately recovered a few weeks beforehand, it was doubtful she would be allowed to accompany the group on this treacherous leg of their journey, much less stand on the front line so boldly as she did now. Freya was not the only one to appreciate the young queen’s maturity over these short, tumultuous months, both in mind and spirit—though she might have been the only one to pity the transition, as well.

Admittedly, Freya was no elder, only taking her first steps into her twenties, but she felt sorry for her younger teammates in the way a mother might lament a child’s loss of innocence. Even though Eiko was the most precocious six-year-old on the planet and Vivi was incredibly powerful on his own, they were only small children, after all, and neither of them asked to be schooled in the facts of war. Even though Garnet spent her earlier years rigorously preparing for her inevitable responsibilities, that didn’t excuse the fact that she was an adolescent attempting to take care of the whole world. Even though his confidence and worldly experience belied his age, Zidane was just

an unruly teenager who thought he knew everything, and it seemed only yesterday Freya was chiding him, *‘You don’t have to grow up so fast.’*

Of course, she was not allowed to talk; she had been exactly Zidane’s age when she first left Burmecia in quest of answers. Oh, how brash and foolish those days seemed now…

Besides, as Zidane had replied, they all had to grow up. It was curious. Freya couldn’t exact when Zidane had stopped following Dagger and she had started following *him*, much less when everyone else had stopped following the young queen and started following him. It was a strangely natural succession, and not even the prudish Steiner or independent Amarant contested his leadership anymore. Everyone had their own mission and their own motives, but no one could deny that he was the cornerstone to their little band of crusaders—even if no one wanted to admit it.

That was probably why, whenever the boy stopped on their surreal tour to consult whatever spectres were talking in his head, no one in the party said a word. No one had the gall to say they knew anything better about this bizarre non-world.

Despite Garland’s cryptic description, Memoria was not some leisurely stroll down memory lane. Though it wasn’t as haunting as Pandemonium, that putrid, howling monument to an undead planet, the castle of memories had an eerie charm of its own. It was a mirage on a grand scale, palpable and solid yet shifting and insubstantial. Brick paths twisted and unraveled like tree branches, doors opened to bottomless skies, portraits on the walls faded and melted into inhuman masks, a moon would shine through east windows while a sun beamed through west ones, the climate and decor would alter dramatically from room to room, and every corner was in varied stages of decay and disrepair.

Everything was timeless, clocks ticking backwards while archaic tapestries disintegrated before one’s eyes. Tidal waves were frozen on the graves of beaches. There were beautiful gardens and dank dungeons. There were ladders to heaven and stairs to hades. Sometimes inanimate objects would drift through thin air or pass through walls like ghosts. Sometimes the wind wailed and moaned like phantoms through a tomb, and sometimes the grounds were as warm and placid as a cottage on the lake. Sometimes the only things that seemed real

were the monsters, the only visible inhabitants of this forbidden realm.

Shrewd, fierce and larger-than-life, the monsters were so formidable that any single specimen was as deadly as a mob of dragons in the outside world. Everyone had to put forth their utmost abilities to simply survive, much less walk through a room unscathed, and Eiko and Dagger's talents in white magic never went to waste. It could have been an exhausting trek if they weren't subsisting on blood-numbing elixirs and they had any sense of daytime or nightfall; much like the architecture, all the hours blended into an incongruous whole. At one point Vivi observed, "It's like I'm dreaming and I can't wake up." Steiner recommended very early on that no one trail behind or leave anyone else's sight at any time for any reason, and that was a sound enough idea for everyone to heed. No one wanted to be left alone in these obfuscating corridors.

Freya had been contemplating that very possibility while her mind wandered ahead of her feet, and by the time she looked up, it was raining.

She spun around, soaking in her surroundings and drinking in her dread; she was alone, her only solace the acutely familiar ambience. The inner courtyard

of Burmecia Palace unfolded around her, fog and rain peeling off the giant statues at each end. She stood in the middle of an embossed stone floor, its swirling pattern catching the rain beneath her toes while the circular gallery cut a dark halo high overhead. Bleary grey light poured in through the open dome like a waterfall, and if not for the dull pattering of rain on rock, the chamber would be utterly void.

'This place…' Last she stood here, Beatrix had given her a taste of the knight's blade. Though Freya knew it was all an illusion, she wondered what sort of memories dredged it out of the aether. Was this a device of her own mind—Memoria playing tricks on her psyche? Or had this place—by means beyond her spiritual grasp—summoned her?

"Freya."

Her veins iced over. The hairs on her body stood like blades of grass in a morning frost. Everything ground to a standstill—the rain, the Mist, her heart—and she turned around like a rusty gate, about to fall apart at the hinges with any sudden jolt.

That voice, *that voice*.

“Freya!”

His call batted uselessly off the rubble and cumulus ceiling, like a ball kicked down an empty alley. Zidane dropped his hands and sighed, frustrated with all the fruitless yelling. They had only lost sight of their dragon knight comrade a few minutes earlier (so it seemed), and the Genome had been so intent in his search for her that when he turned around to check on the others (just a second ago!) they had all vanished, too. Now he was marooned in a ruined ghost town, everything the depressing hue of ash and blue copper.

He punted a loose stone, watching it plunge through a pothole in the cobblestone road and into oblivion. “Godsdammit, I hate this place.” When he glanced northward, a veil of clouds slunk away into the mountains to reveal a faraway citadel, its massive spires and granite effigies crowned in rain.

A bell rang between his ears. “Hey! This is… Burmecia?” The blonde scratched his head, puzzling over the locale. ‘What am I doing here? And why am I talking to myself?’ He shook himself into focus and headed towards the palace. “I need to get a grip —this place is starting to get to me.”

He arrived at the outer wall before even his mind could cross the deceptive distance. The bricks glowed with a rainy sheen in the wan daylight, and every step was dripping with deja vu. The last time he visited Burmecia, it was in turmoil, the dead and dying littering the streets as the city was abandoned. Now the desolation was of a different sort; though everything was intact, not a soul was in sight.

'Geez, where am I going? Did Freya come this way? I wish I knew where everyone else went. Is Dagger all right? I hope she's not stranded like I am. How the hell did I get here, anyway? Why won't Garland give me any straight answers? I really *hate this place.'*

He methodically followed the path of recent memory, scaling the armored sculptures and stalking through the upper archways until he was on a balcony overlooking a large courtyard. He remembered this area; it was where he had first spotted Kuja and fought Beatrix. Sticking out of the dreary setting like a tongue of flame was a dragon knight in a blood red coat, her stark figure scarcely touched by the downpour.

Zidane leaned over the edge and began to wave down to her. "Hey! Fre—"

When he saw who was with her, his shout got lodged in his throat.

“Sir Fratley…” Freya whispered, entranced by the man standing plainly before her. His every thread was defined in rich, sure color, the edges crisp and crystalline, and his posture was as steadfast and unreserved as the midday sun. It took all her willpower not to fall to her knees out of awe, delight and courtesy.

The visitant spoke, his visage obscured by the wide brim of his hat while he studied the polearm in his hand. “I hear there are many fierce warriors out in the world—some more powerful than even I…”

Hadn’t she heard this before?

“…Beatrix of Alexandria, in particular. They say her swordsmanship is the best in the land.”

No. No. *No*.

Not again. “I… what?” Her knees wobbled, her vision blurred and her thoughts garbled. She was disconnected from the present, the past, the future—everything that made this moment special and

painful was rushing over her like rapids, swift and seizing.

Iron-tail Fratley continued reciting his lines, like an actor in a misbegotten play. “Please understand, Freya. Right now, Burmecia is at peace, while other nations are slowly but surely gaining power. I don’t know if my spear alone is enough to protect Burmecia… which is precisely why I must go out into the world.”

The next words flowed off her tongue like nimbus-snow—like her own spirit departing her body. “Sir Fratley… I don’t…” *know what to say, know what I’m doing, know why I’m here, know what’s real anymore* “…think I can live on my own —not without you.”

He looked directly at her, eyes cold coals in the shadowy pitch of his face, and answered with such feathery resolve that it was like a message from an angel. “Freya, you’re going to be fine. Trust your strength… and have faith in your destiny. Once I complete my journey around the world, I will return to Burmecia.”

Zidane wasn’t sure what he was watching—a premonition? A glimpse of the past? One big, meaningless illusion? Was that even the real Freya? Or Fratley? The latter was impossible, but he couldn’t be positive of anything in this world, where not even the ground he tread was trustworthy.

He was eavesdropping now, too high and removed from their private world to intrude on it, though as he observed their exchange his heart began to sink through his stomach.

Fratley closed the gap between the estranged couple and hovered at Freya’s side for some while, his voice too low to decipher through the drizzle. Freya tentatively reached out and touched his arm, as if she were fondling a wraith, and her response was faint and woefully fragmented.

“…promise me……return.”

“Freya…” Zidane whimpered, his lungs burning with the urge to holler. Though he’d never seen it before, he knew this scene—he knew how it would end. It was wrong. It was like watching her heart break all over again. His hand moved of its own volition, resting on his dagger, and his face flushed with an alarming desire to cut that man into shreds, real or not. He wanted to jump down right away and

wreck this twisted delusion, though a tiny voice rooted him to the spot.

‘You can’t protect her from this.’

Fratley stepped back, lending Freya room to admire the gift he just bestowed her: a ribbon, tied in a prim bow to the end of her tail. She held it under her nose and stared, thunderstruck. It was the same. It was the same in every property, light and starchy between her nerveless fingers, and it fit her barren tail as if it had never left—an immaculate memento.

The man she loved turned his back, shouldered his spear and curtly declared, “I promise.” Then he walked away.

That was all. She wavered on leaden feet, torn between sprinting after him like a desperate loon and collapsing where she stood. Five seconds and five years later, it all seemed futile. He was gone. Gone.

Again.

The rain picked up to a torrent, blanketing the courtyard with static, and a stupid, cackling sob racked her inadequate frame. What a foolish fancy—her skinny, feeble-minded self posing as a dragon

knight—what a scandal. It was a cosmic joke. She didn't deserve the slightest scrap of his affection, and for once it did not dismay Freya to check behind her and find the ribbon disappeared. Gone. Of course.

It was funny. It was ironic. It was fate, laughing at her. She was the joke. It figured that in one of the rare moments she let her guard down, that ribbon would be snatched from her forever. It was that final golden shred of her past, whisked away like a balloon on a careless breeze. All because of…

"Freya!" Him.

Zidane was rushing across the courtyard to meet her, though she wouldn't face him. Why bother? She didn't know where he had come from or how long he had been there, and she didn't care. What did it matter anymore? Why did she care at all? What was the point of the whole spectacle, except to mock her?

What was the ***point?!*** She found herself screaming that aloud while jamming the butt of her lance into the ground. Sparks splintered off the stone and ignited the rain in a furious starburst that threw the approaching boy into a skidding halt.

Zidane stood back, cowed by the outburst, his lively vocabulary suddenly lacking. “Freya, I…”

She speared him with a fiery look. Because of *him*. He shrank before her glowering brimstone, a drenched and wretched-looking sunflower, and ignorantly croaked, “I’m sorry.”

Freya’s demeanour hardened, cooling like lava in the rain. Zidane didn’t know better. He wasn’t going to understand, and the last thing she wanted was his gods-forsaken pity. It was time to forget—to bury everything in the pit of her heart—and move on. She hefted her lance and pithily ordered, “Let us go. The others must be waiting.”

“Freya, wait,” the boy called back, his expression somewhat swollen.

“Zidane, we don’t have time,” she answered smartly, imploring him to take a hint.

Typically, Zidane was too dense to mind it. “I know, but this’ll just take a second.” He inched closer, one hand rooting through his back pocket. “Close your eyes and stand still, okay?”

“What? Are you mad?”

He impetuously stamped a foot. “Just do it! Please?”

If only to spur this diversion along, she obeyed. Her ears pricked at the sound of shuffling feet while a glove firmly closed around the charred hide of her tail. Freya swallowed the impulse to flick it away, and readied a stern growl at the base of her throat. “Zidane…”

He handily talked over her objection. “I wanted to give you this later, but in case, uh, I don’t get the chance…”

Freya huffed. That was a very trifling way to say, ‘In case we don’t make it out of here alive.’

“Okay!” he chirped a moment later. “Open your eyes.”

Freya immediately inspected herself, and there it was: a bright yellow ribbon. Too bright and too yellow, it bobbed on the end of her tail like a crude fishing lure, clashing with the smoldering browns, oranges and reds of her garb.

Somewhere between the hissing rain and her buzzing shock she saw the boy shrug and explain, “I know it’s not as good because he didn’t give it to you, but…” and she didn’t see or hear anything else

because her hands were covering her face and the growl she had been saving for him started boiling into a sopping laugh.

It was funny. So, so terribly funny, she didn't know how to speak. She had spent all those years away from home carefully constructing armor around her heart, so that she would be shielded against the greatest disappointments the world had to offer, yet all it took was one reminder—one fragile little ribbon—to tear it all down. She was a joke.

A gloved hand gingerly settled on her arm, and when she peered down, the rain in her eyes was falling in his hair. "Freya?" Was she the one trembling, or he? "Are you okay?"

She scrubbed her wet muzzle and pieced together her broken composure. Why did Zidane always do things like this, to make her feel silly all over again? "Yes… I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" The boy cocked a sly smirk, eyes glinting blue with red on the fringes. "You're smiling."

Freya gruffly pushed him away. "Oh, you…! I hate you," she snapped, the bite to her words

smoothed by a helpless grin. She hated the way he could dispel a sour moment with one wink, and she hated the way she couldn't stop smiling when he looked at her like they were *both* the joke—because Zidane just couldn't leave her out of it.

He stumbled out of reach, snickering like a lout while his tail flailed for balance. "Ahaha, you're welcome! Geez." He was about to make some gibe on her warped sense of humor when he stopped and tilted a surprised look skyward. "Oh hey, the rain stopped."

She gazed up at the disbanding clouds, the wet courtyard clear and pungent in the fresh light. She suddenly felt refreshed and… warm. "So it has."

"Heh. That's weird." He shrugged, dismissing yet another of Memoria's phenomena. "Com'on, let's go catch up with everybody before we're lost for su—"

It was like watching an air cab crash out of the blue. One moment Zidane was speaking to her, and the next he was knocked to the ground by a huge, flapping, snarling mass. It had a face like a bomb carcass, four stout legs and a gnarled, fleshy pair of wings—though its most distinctive trait was the extra heads: two reptilian ones tacked onto each side

of its blunt neck, and another, shriveled one adorning the tip of its tail.

It was a chimera, another mindless demon, and without a thought for the odds of such an encounter or the odds of *surviving* such an encounter Freya hurled her lance like a javelin, pegging the monster between its lesser heads. It recoiled a step, blood and pus sluicing from its fetid maw, and Freya jumped forward to retrieve her weapon while Zidane rolled out of the way.

She tucked her lance beneath her arm and bounced off the chimera's back, a small, toothy head snapping at her heels while her blade dug a furrow in the monster's flank. She landed on her toes, whirled around and flipped back over its wings, dodging the flood of poison bile ejected from one of the chimera's stomachs. Zidane's daggers raked across one its weal-kissed eyes, distracting the beast while Freya sorted her lance for a critical strike. She skated off the ground on ethereal wings and shredded the chimera from rib to rib, dragons howling in her wake. Both its wings exploded into a hundred shards of bone and bloody leather, like a couple of gory wicker chairs.

The chimera reared onto its hind legs with an injured, dissonant shriek and Zidane pounced on its exposed underbelly, complementing the tear Freya had rendered on its topside. It closed its forepaws as if to trap him, but he nimbly ducked beneath its elbow and skittered away. Freya leveled her lance for another pass while the three front heads chased the Genome. Just as one of her feet left the ground, the rear serpentine head whipped in her direction, a glacial jet spewing off its icy tongue. She twisted mid-leap to avoid the blast, only too late to save her initiative, and Freya hit the floor in a heap.

She began to wiggle for purchase, only to discover her legs useless, and when Freya looked down she saw why: they were encased in a wave of ice. She cursed and lifted her lance, prepared to chisel her way to freedom, but when another small head leaned over the chimera's shoulder and fastened its sharp yellow eyes on her, she realized she had a problem. It opened wide, baring its viper fangs and turgid cheeks, and Freya unpleasantly recalled that *this* head was the one that could spit venom fifty feet across a room.

Freya held the flat of her lance before her, braced to deflect a shot of poison if she had to, though Zidane had another plan. "Hey you!!" he blustered,

commanding the chimera's attention, and everything happened in two seconds. The least of its heads lurched forward to bite him while its heavier base swiped a forelimb larger than a man. Zidane jumped, sprang off the top of its foot, shoved one dagger down the least's throat, planted the other in the chimera's expansive forehead and then swung by the handle onto the monster's neck. There was a startled moment on Freya and the remaining lesser head's behalf while Zidane reached and grabbed the latter beneath the chin, crushing its gullet between his fingers.

The viper-head's eyes bulged as it disgorged its loaded venom sacs straight into the air, showering the chimera and its unwanted passenger with viscous, lime-colored acid. Zidane yelled some uncanny oath and began to slide off one side, his grip slackened as spots burned into his skin. He managed to catch one of his daggers just as the viper-head lunged at him in vengeance, though it was the bulk of the monster that settled the score, pitching the Genome wholly off its back with one mighty heave. The viper-head's slavering fangs grazed his arm in that haphazard stroke, and when Zidane was reintroduced to the ground thirty paces

away, Freya glimpsed him bleeding through the sizzling gash.

The boy started up, staggered once and then collapsed, not to move again. The chimera, sensing its quarry immobilized, vacillated between a rat or a monkey meal for a moment before making up its scattered minds and charging at Zidane.

Freya panicked. The ice wouldn't budge and Zidane wouldn't get up and the chimera was going to eat him and then probably eat her too and nobody would ever find their remains since this place was already like a grave for dead people's dreams and she would be worse than forgotten, she'd just be gone, gone like *him*—

No no no godsdamnit NO! She screamed and burned until the ice shattered around her ankles like Shiva's bath. Precious seconds bowed for her as she stood and jumped, the air screeching as it split by her blade.

The chorus of her brethren was loud and brilliant as the dragons sank their claws in her nerves and eclipsed her spirit, and she breathed, walked and flew in their stead. Her lance was a grand's bolt of lightning, splitting the heavens and shaking the earth, and the chimera's path was broken by an

uproar of stone and dirt where her polearm ruptured the ground. Before it could retrace its steps another was flung its way, and another, and another, the dragons' storm of spears nearly infinite. Freya was higher and darker and more terrible than any thundercloud, and the longer her gaze pierced the chimera's back the more she hated it—watching his backside, watching him walk away, hating that back and that iron tail and hating everything precious being taken away from her like she was nothing, nobody, something not even the rain would touch and now that she had even a ribbon worth fighting for *he* was being taken away from her, too.

This would not *be* and she let the chimera know it in person, plummeting onto that hateful back and stabbing and shearing and slicing off one head, two, three—the monster had quit bleating by then but she wasn't finished—she wouldn't be done until every stone in that courtyard was caked in its blood and there. was. nothing. left.

By the time Freya's trance ebbed there was no more chimera—just a spattering of viscera, fractions of bones, a slick of blood and grease broad enough to cover an ocean and a handful of miniature icebergs. She stood panting and light-headed at the epicenter of the carnage, washed in Hades'

afterbirth, and wondered what in the world just came over her. She had never experienced hate so driving, and it was as frightening as it was cathartic. Was that the true nature of trance? Was that what made Kuja so powerful? It was a concept to be reckoned with.

She would have to ponder it later, when her head wasn't spinning and the odor of four distinct corpses wasn't assaulting her sensitive nose. Freya leaned heavily on her lance and groaned, deliberating over whether she ought to be sick—and then she remembered what was behind this mess.

Zidane.

His still, crumpled form was almost impossible to make out of the demon slag, and her heart wrenched with the thought that he had been consumed in the whirlwind of her trance, as well. It was a relief to pull him from the ichorous debris in one piece, though when she crouched to examine his wounds her hope began to wither.

"Wake up, wake up please…" she begged as she searched for a pulse, some twitch of life. There was an insane amount of blood and other zombie humors, all his cheerful blues and yellows soaked in arcane soot and rust, and it was difficult to discern fresh bleeding from the chimera's soil. Freya

couldn’t find anything deeper than some superficial nicks and a scrape on his arm, though when she tried to brush him clean with her sleeve, she unearthed a patch of skin that was rapidly turning an inauspicious shade of green.

Freya was forced to admit she knew next to nothing about chimera venom. There were few reports concerning the demons’ existence, much less their biology, and as for personal experience, she only knew to avoid their teeth and spittle at all costs. Their team had done so well until Zidane decided to get reckless, and now Freya was left wondering how to treat the toxin that was spidering through his veins like a black web. He lay in silent, clammy pallor, his tail frayed next to him like a dead, kinked weed, and when she held an ear to his chest she heard only murmurs.

His left arm was most discolored, but if the poison spread too far it would kill him, she knew. What she didn’t know was how much time he had, or if time necessarily passed in this realm the same way it did in the regular world—or the rest of Memoria, for that matter. All she could see was midnight setting in like blight on his bleached skin, every healthy hue draining from his elbow to his shoulder and now his neck. He needed an antidote, a

remedy, a panacea, something—something she didn’t have. Freya couldn’t believe how careless she was to leave her herb pouch with Eiko, though who could honestly expect a situation like this? Their group had intended to stay together. It was too late to blame anyone’s lack of foresight, so Freya concentrated on her last resort: Reis, the patron mother of Burmecia’s dragon knights.

The shamans had always been reverent in their adoration of Reis, and Freya was taught that any of her Burmecian daughters who called her name would receive great blessings (regrettably, Freya used her name in vain more often than appropriate.) In all her days as a dragon knight, there had been a few desperate moments where Freya hailed her spiritual mother for aid, and they were always in the heat of battle, when all other resources were spent. Whatever the shamans had promised via Reis, Freya believed it; those few, desperate moments were blessed with more luck and miraculous recoveries than she could attribute to any other time of her life.

Though she was confident in her faith, this would be the first time Freya ever asked for Reis’s help to save another—not even kindred, at that. She wasn’t sure if this would count as blasphemy, selfishness or both, but right now it was just her and Zidane, and

the boy was more important to her than a brother or the shamans. She wasn't going to sit idle and watch him slip away.

Freya took a seat on the floor, gathered the sickly Genome into her arms (gods, he was *cold*), closed her eyes and prayed. The old, familiar lines squeezed her heart until it wept.

'Hear me Gracious Reis, goddess mother, benevolent heart of dragon. I beseech thee fly to my aid, rend the tongues from my enemies' mouths and breathe peace upon my brothers. I beg thee goddess mother, take this ailing body as my brother, and bless him on my behalf. I beg thee goddess mother, hear my prayer.' Please help…

She muttered in a corporeal afterthought, her voice too hoarse to be a true threat or a real prayer, "Zidane Tribal, if you do not wake up I will never forgive you."

Reis's answer started to trickle down her neck, teasing her hair and filling her chest with tender warmth. The dulcet hand of a goddess traversed her soul with barely a whisper, and Freya was swaddled in a balmy haze from which she almost didn't want to wake.

When she willed her eyes to open, the sensation passed. For a pregnant minute nothing stirred, a divine breeze drifting out of the courtyard. Freya checked the boy in her lap and found nothing changed. She bit her lip and flattened her ears, too sorry to execrate the fates. *'Forgive me Reis, Zidane… It was worth a try.'*

"…uhn…"

Her ears popped up so abruptly they nearly knocked her helm off. "Zidane!"

He convulsed and sputtered like a throttled duck, tail flopping over his legs, and Freya held him tightly until the fit was quelled. He looked dazedly in every direction at once and drank air like a starved fish. "I… uh… guh?"

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She kissed his hair. She felt like a shaman, herself. "It's okay. Reis is with you."

Zidane rallied his senses and squinted up at her, all black, white and blue. His voice was a strained wisp. "…the hell?"

Freya cleared her throat, wiped her countenance clean and started over. "It's nothing. A chimera attacked us, remember? It threw you off."

“…oh.”

“You were struck down by its venom. I thought you wouldn’t wake up. Do you feel all right?”

“I…” He shuddered. “…hurts…” A glint of alarm lit his eyes. “…can’t move. Can’t breathe.”

Freya grimaced. Reis’s wind would only help so much… She would have to take whatever small blessings she could get. “It’s the venom. I can’t do anything about it. I’m sorry.”

“Ugh… what… stinks?” Zidane wrinkled his nose and swept a look over the gruesome scenery. “Whoa. What… happened…? You… chase it off… yourself?”

“Actually… this is all that’s left,” she hedged, uncharacteristically bashful. She wasn’t sure if going into a rabid trance was something to brag about.

He blinked slowly. “Holy… shit. Remind me to… never… piss you off again.”

She cracked an absurd laugh. “I assure you, if we ever get out of this, I’m going to beat the daylights out of you.”

“Mmm. Kinky.”

Freya kindly ignored that. Zidane gave a dim, short laugh of his own—even his tongue was a rotten purple color. “Heh… I… really done it now…”

Thinking it over, she knew why he jumped on that chimera’s back. He was trying to save her. It was the same stupid bravado that always got him into trouble. She didn’t need his help; she could have taken care of it. She could have broken free in time, or used a dragon technique to deflect the venom shot, or maybe—there was a whole other dimension of ’maybe’s. Normally she would call him a fool, and perhaps a host of other things. She would have given anything at the moment to make this situation feel normal.

Freya simply hugged him. He was still cold. “You little fool…”

“…m-m-m cold…” he stuttered, labored breaths caught in another shiver.

Zidane wasn’t going to get better on his own. Poisons required antidotes, and they were stuck without one. What now? Call for help? Attract more monsters with her shouting (if their awful scent wasn’t already)? Come to grips with the fact that this might be a losing battle? The shamans couldn’t

prepare her for this. “Hang on. The others will find us any minute. We’ll get you some medicine and you’ll be fine.”

She didn’t really expect Zidane to buy such shallow reassurance—he was a fool, not a moron. She had no idea, really. The others could be as lost as they were.

…They could even be worse. Freya didn’t want to picture it.

The smile he offered was more for her than for him. “…glad you’re with me.”

She gulped, the squeaky sound embarrassingly mouse-like. “Shush. Save your breath.”

Zidane listened, and waited, fingers weakly clasping her coat. They were pathetic and helpless, like a couple of cripples waiting for death.

Death… how quaint, now after everything they’ve been through. For some reason, Freya had always dreamed of a lonely demise, perhaps off a great height in a rush of glory, or even in a dragon’s stomach. This… wasn’t what she had imagined at all. She didn’t want to leave so much work unfinished, but…

At least she wasn’t alone. “…I’m glad you’re with me, too.”

Zidane sniffed with a dumb grin, a reply trailing into delirium as he buried his face in her shoulder and fell asleep.

It was so peaceful… Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

“Hellooooooo!”

That voice! Freya’s chin snapped up, scouring the gallery for the brazen little intrusion. A dainty mop of purple hair peeked over the ledge. “Hey!”

The dragon knight’s heart leapt into her throat. “Eiko!”

The girl did a double take, any childish expletive over Freya’s unexcused absence aborted at the sight of the monstrous massacre. Riddled with ice, blood, water, grit and thunder-craters, from above the courtyard must have looked like a geographical nightmare. “Holy cow! What happened??”

Freya wasted no time on explanations. “Eiko! Please hurry! We need assistance!”

Eiko hopped to the rescue, scurrying into the background. “Hang on, we’ll be right down!”

Freya sighed and rocked the boy in her arms, mouthing blessed relief to the heavens. *‘Thank you, Reis.’*

The eight regrouped on the spot, boisterous and fussy. Quina was belting out oddball, home-brewed remedies that Steiner hotly disputed, while the two white mages clambered to administer antidotes and Curagas until Freya was dizzy.

“You need only gigan-basted frog skin! Put on tongue, draw out poison!”

“Frogs aren’t the cure for everything, you big goof!”

Clank-clank. “This senseless banter isn’t helping!”

“…like a bunch of retards at the vet…”

“Shut up, Coral!”

“Guys, please don’t shout…”

“Hey, I think he’s coming around!”

“Zidane!”

Everyone held their breath and crowded around the Genome, watching his sluggish movements

stretch into a fully-fledged yawn. Disoriented from the swarming attention, Freya hadn't found the bearings, modesty or even space to remove Zidane from her lap. She clung to the boy for safety, his back pressed into her breast, so that when he at last opened his eyes his first vision was Dagger kneeling attentively in front of him, her worried hands clapped over his own.

The two teens stared at one another for a fuzzy, blushing spell before Zidane (perhaps still delirious) broke it. "Huh. Heaven."

Dagger retreated with a confused frown, her cheeks burning. "W-What?"

There wasn't another second to analyze his remark, since Freya began to mercilessly box the boy's ears. "You big idiot I can't believe you never do that again you scared the life out of me—"

Zidane tumbled over the sticky floor, thrashing like a beached carp under her matronly battering. "Ow! Ah! No, hell, hell!"

"F-Freya, calm down!" Dagger and Eiko intervened, pulling the wrathful dragon knight away by the arms. The fitful pair caught their breaths while Eiko finished scanning her patients. She

nodded brightly at Zidane. “You look a lot better! Can you stand?”

“Uh, sure?” He shakily rose to his feet and flashed a thumbs-up, an encouraging tinge to his pale complexion. The only trace of his brush with the reaper was a neatly hemmed scar above his elbow. It was rather amazing, how inured everyone was to such close calls—such was the miracle of white magic.

“Good!” Steiner determined. “We must be moving on quickly, before more monsters are drawn to this bedlam.”

Freya nodded weakly, not about to argue with leaving this accursed place behind. “Agreed. Let us go.”

As soon as they began walking, Zidane tipped dangerously towards the ground, suddenly less certain about his stability. Dagger cried half a note of warning and jerked forward to grab him, though in a deft second Freya (who was standing closer) snagged him by the shirt.

“Ahm… whoops,” he said lamely. “Oaf,” Freya said in kind.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Dagger pried.

Zidane shook off her concern with a sorry laugh while throwing an arm around Freya's back, catching her off-guard and leaning suspiciously into her side. "Haha, oh yeah, just stood up too fast, I guess. Totally fine."

"Hey!" Eiko, already at the gate with the others, turned back to admonish the three. "Nooooo more lagging behind!"

Not fully convinced, Dagger regarded him with a wary, anxious look before shuffling to rejoin the group. Once she was out of earshot, Zidane whispered into the dragon knight's coat, "Hold me up a bit, would ya babe?"

"You fool, if you need to rest you should just say so," she whispered back, preserving his discreet little game nonetheless.

"No, we can't stop now," he insisted, his earnest tone outweighing her sensibleness. "I got a feeling something really bad's gonna happen if we don't hurry up. I can walk it off, really—that antidote is working."

Freya's only dissent was a humming frown. Unfortunately, she had a very similar hunch. "Very well, if you insist."

He winked up at her, looping his other arm around hers for support as they walked together. “Thanks. You’re a doll. You almost make as good a crutch as you do a pillow.”

“Hrmph! If you can’t walk on your own by the time we’re back on the road, I’ll toss you over the nearest pitfall for that.”

“Hehehe.”

Meanwhile, everyone hurried out, ready to resume the hunt for Kuja and put an end to all his madness. Memoria had more surprises in store for them, Freya was certain, but there was now one less episode to plague her dreams. Memories were savage tricksters… She would never look upon that rainy day in the same light again.

They had finally departed the fake Burmecia when Freya was jarred from another bitter reverie by something thin and furry. Zidane, apparently fit to carry himself again, pushed away and pressed ahead, his tail ghosting over hers in a furtive caress. It slid from base to tip, broke away at the ribbon and then returned to its owner as if nothing had trespassed. She passed him a startled look, but Zidane had already wheeled to the front of the pack, not even

glancing back, and she lost the nerve to interrogate the boy.

Though Freya held her shame by refraining from comments or excuses, Zidane lacked any compunction over divulging the chimera incident to the rest of the group. “Man, you should have seen that monster that jumped us! It was as big as a house,” he was already boasting to Dagger.

“Oh really…”

“Yeah, and then…”

While they chattered, Freya’s gaze lingered on her tail’s replaced ornament, too bright and too yellow and too tainted—and she realized that she had never properly thanked him. She shook her head. Now was not the time.

The dragon knight walked on, wondering what her memories really longed for.

A/N: I’ve always been a little torn over whether to capitalize “dragon knight” or “black mage.” FFIX’s strategy guide sez yes and the game script sez no.

…The strat guide is made of arse; I'll trust the game.

Next time: Missing Half. Reviews appreciated!

P.S: Yes, I made a… rather sizable edit to the last scene. I didn't like how rushed it felt. Very naughty of me (plz forgive.)

12. Missing Half

Everything was fine. Just fine.

This Freya knew because that was how she answered Fratley's question every morning. Plain, routine, automatic. Fine.

Many months later, and she said everything was fine. That was how she started her days in the roughshod barracks outside Burmecia Palace. Fratley greeted her with a hot cup of tea (he was so thoughtful about her habits, bless him, even if he had to learn them all over again), asked how she was faring, and then left to prepare for the day's work.

Since the war's end, laborers and craftsmen trickled back into the kingdom of eternal rain, striving to rebuild their homes and lives. Some were contractors outsourced from Alexandria and Lindblum, signed on by their queen and regent, respectively, though most were Burmecian refugees who knew how to count more blessings than losses. If their forefathers could build a city in the rain, after all, it could be done again. Freya sometimes preferred a more involved post, something to keep her mind busy and her hands dirty, but as the fates

would have it, her job was to oversee the scant supply of soldiers in the town and palace. Although she had to chase away a looter or two, it was hardly exciting work, and often she would patrol the streets on her own, observing the construction sites and accepting the admiring nods and cheerful waves of her compatriots.

She had become something of a legend in their eyes—an “exemplary dragon knight” according to the prime minister, who had assumed head of the monarchy in the king’s death and Prince Puck’s (very persistent) absence. Freya always dismissed such praise with a humble shake and then a disdainful snort later, behind a closed door. She knew herself better: a terrible role model, a soldier who had abandoned her kingdom to pursue a shadow when her country needed her most. Apparently her departure was handily forgiven, or simply forgotten. The fiction was easier to stomach: she was an *adventurer*, a *crusader*, a *champion*. They were silly, folksy labels, the stuff of rumors, but even if it didn’t feel proper, Freya didn’t have the heart to take away their hero. If that was her part in this grand play, so be it.

Sometimes nosy people or noisy children would stop her with outlandish questions, anything from,

“What’s it like on another continent?” to, “What’s it like on another world?” Sometimes she was asked about the others. Fame had touched her seven friends similarly, and it was difficult not to meddle in the people’s fiction with *their* truths. One time a little girl wondered if the Flaming Amarant could really breathe fire, and all Freya had the power to do was laugh and walk away.

Today was another fine day, and Freya wandered the city limits, toeing the crenels of the outer wall until they were consumed by a steep natural ramp. She kept treading the mossy foothills until she found an outcropping between the city, the plains and the mountains, too remote for the sounds of life to reach her. All the builders, supply caravans, officers and peddlers appeared as distant as small birds, their clamour drowned under the rain as everyone worked through a haze of churning grey-white-blue. She stood on a rocky peak, the black-green hard on her feet yet soft between her toes, and not a drop disturbed the peace. The air was clear, crisp and fresh like dew on a leaf.

Here she was, Freya realized with a sullen start. Here she was alone with her worst enemy: her own mind.

Most of the time Freya had nothing to do but think, which could be a dangerous hobby for a despondent soul. Lately, however, she had been training her sense of optimism. Although the ruins of her homeland—her past—were painful to behold, she knew there were many things left to be thankful for—things to look forward to.

For instance, Fratley was back, this time for good. As much as Freya wanted to say she had all she could hope for and could now live happily ever after, that simply wasn't true. It wasn't that easy. Freya could be practical; she didn't expect his memories to return all at once, if they ever did at all. She could be patient and wait for the past to catch up with him, if that's what it took. They had not yet made any vows towards their future (the times were too hectic to be considering one's personal affairs; the welfare of Burmecia had to come first), but they had the rest of their lives, didn't they? Besides, she had to learn that the present was the most important time of all.

Some things didn't change, regardless. His newfound forgetfulness aside, Fratley was as strong and faithful as ever, and all the qualities she ever admired about him were still there. He was noble, firm in manner, gentle in speech, honest and

courteous. He was not too forthright with his feelings, but not too reticent, either. He could be as swift and precise as an arrow, or as steady and pensive as a rock on the shore. He was the perfect companion to a legendary hero, but even when Fratley said he loved her with as much kind sincerity as his absent mind could muster, that couldn't slake the festering unease in Freya's heart.

What was this ill feeling, then—this burning in her spirit that could not be quenched? She sometimes stayed on her watch longer than necessary to ponder it, fruitlessly. It didn't make sense. The Mist was gone. Kuja was vanquished. The war was over. She had been reunited with her long-lost love. Every day was building towards something better. What was stopping her from realizing her own happiness? Something must be in the way.

('For once in your life, why can't you be honest!?')

No… something was missing. Not wrong, not bad, just… incomplete.

It did not take long to figure out whom to blame. She wasn't ignorant of the song of her heart, as contradictory as the verses often could be. It had not

been humming the same tune since *he* left, and that was many months ago. Freya wondered when their roles had switched—when she had started avoiding his name, even in her whispered thoughts. That used to be Fratley's place of reverence in her mind: the singular *he*. Since Fratley was by her side every day now, it became a pointless abstraction that she shortly abandoned. Suddenly *he* was not the *him* she had always been chasing in her dreams, and Freya didn't know what to make with what was left. She wanted to be grateful for Fratley's presence at all—for whatever fickle time life granted them together, but despite the similarities, it was difficult to bridge the gap between the man she knew then and the one she knew now…

…And in the months that followed, *he* filled Fratley-the-Lost's place.

She wanted to stop thinking about him, really she did. Freya had other, more important concerns ('… more important things to worry about, like Burmecia…') and it was ridiculous to spend so much time—just a little every day—dwelling on a man who wasn't even hers. Every time she tried to sort through her mundane, daily schedule (there were so many things left to do before Burmecia was even half the kingdom it used to be), she slipped into

reminiscence, and that's when *he* flooded her mind, like a wild river from a broken dam.

She remembered everything about him—good, bad, shining and ugly—even the things she wished she could forget.

She remembered the way he spit and swore loudly in all company (even *Amarant* practiced some discretion about this); the way he would never sit still for five minutes; the way he wouldn't keep his hands to himself; the way he wouldn't keep his *tail* to himself; the way he kicked her in his sleep; the way he bragged about the most absurd and crass feats, up to and including bowel movements; the way he would scratch his ass in front of absolutely anyone if the urge so struck him, not exempting the next Queen of Alexandria and the Regent of Lindblum (and his wife); his incessantly prurient interest in women (and his misogynistic opinions on the same); his total lack of shame about his body, and the way he shunned clothing in the heat; the way he was constantly caked in some exotic dirt or grime; the way he could turn any harmless statement into innuendo; the way he kept her informed on the status of his genitals (she was blissfully unaware of the concept of "morning wood" before they met); the way he came back from his countless,

unexplained excursions reeking of gysahl greens; the way he got carried away while telling stories around the campfire, until he ended up sharing three for the price of one; the way he smirked and stuck his chest out when he was about to make an embellishment on such a story; the way he chuckled and scratched his neck when she called him on those stupid embellishments; the way his tail curled high like a question mark when he laughed…

She remembered even strange, subtle nuances she *shouldn't* have noticed, much less magnified in her mind's eye now that he was gone—the way he waddled like a duck when he walked, yet swayed like a cat when prowling; or the way he sifted his hand through his hair each morning before tying it off with a ponytail; or the way he canted his hips while leaning against a wall so that his belt slid down his curiously feminine thighs—things that left her warm-blooded and addled some nights. Things that made her wonder what she was missing with a fervour Fratley rarely inspired.

The last thing she thought she would miss, which she would rather *die* than admit, was his scent. A Burmecian's sensitive nose put a lot of stock in fragrances, and perfume and flower shops happened to be popular staples of their culture. She never

found anything alluring about his burnt-cookie, grass-stained, golden chocobo-musk, but now it was disorienting to start the day without it, as if she kept expecting to awaken in the earthen, boyish aroma of a cramped tent.

She remembered snips, snaps and little exchanges relevant to absolutely nothing, and these would crop up unprompted in the background of her mind while the front was carrying a present conversation.

"Freya, don't you—"
('—go running off, now.')
('Hey! Keep grabbing my tail, woman, and we're gonna have a throw-down.')
('Fine, I have yet to kick your butt for calling me rat-face.')
('It's a term of endearment?')
('I'm sure. Just be back before sunset or I'll take you up on your offer, and I promise you won't enjoy it.')
"Enjoy what? What are you talking about, Lady Freya?"
"Hmm? Oh, sorry…"

It was embarrassing. She wished she could stop. Sometimes she dared to remember the things he said that made her fur skitter and her nose itch.
('What in the world are you staring at?')

Sometimes she could hear him prodding her with that smug curiosity. (‘Nothing! Just trying to see what color your eyes are under that stupid hat.’)
At the time, she couldn’t exactly answer for herself (when was the last time she’d scrutinized a looking glass so avidly?) but she could tell right away that his were blue, blue like leviathan’s stone, blue that rippled with lazy, inviting mischief, like the coin-dappled bed of a coral reef, treasure buried just beneath.

Fratley didn’t always understand, and she would never explain everything. Once he pointed to her tail and remarked, out of pure naiveté, “I didn’t know you wore ribbons. Where did you get that?” and her heart plummeted like a stone down an old well. Of course, of course, of course she excused him, the same excuse—of course he didn’t remember. “A friend gave it to me,” she didn’t tell a lie, though the half of truth was crumpled up and thrown down the well too.

Every day, against her sound judgment and sanity, she wished *he* never left.

(’I still can’t believe you’re doing this. You’ve changed…’)

It was too late to ask why he had gone on his fool's errand, and even if she had (and she could have sworn she did, or at least one of them did), she wouldn't have received a straight answer. Freya's only feeble consolation was that she did all she could to help. She had offered her lance just as Steiner had offered his sword, but *he* refused both. It was something he had to do on his own. So he said.

Why?

('…we all have to make big decisions in life sometimes.')

How could one choose certain death over a promising life? Sometimes she was jealous of Kuja, for taking the answer down with him. Wasn't that insane? Jealous of a dead madman. Sometimes furious, really. Or even worse, jealous of Iifa—a mindless *tree*.

('…might've done the same thing if I were in his shoes.')

Sometimes she wondered what those plays would look like, the ones that zealous writers in Lindblum threatened to forge over their adventures. Although a dragon knight's formal education was more focused on the art of combat than other schools, Freya did

have a literature tutor once hammer the definition of a “tragic hero” into her skull.

‘A tragic hero is one who discovers his fate by his own actions. His downfall is brought by a flaw in his character.’

Brought to his fate by his own nature.

(‘I can’t just leave him. There’s no way I could live with myself.’)

Something in his nature made him go back to save Kuja. And he died trying. Thus, tragedy. How academic. How simple. Just fine.

If *he* was the tragic hero, what did that make *her*? Or the rest of them?

Sometimes she remembered the long flight home. Everyone stalled on the desk of the Hilda Garde 3 like zombies, oppressed by royal silence. Long after the first stars pricked the navy firmament and Cid ushered everyone below deck, Garnet was still leaning over the rail, crying goodbye with mute tears. Freya volunteered to fetch her out of the night’s chill, however she stopped before her hand reached the girl’s shoulder, struck down by the queen’s crumbled visage.

Her cheeks were stained with salt, her Bahamut-cinder eyes were veiled in black shadows and her usually rosy, open lips were drawn into a flat line. Her hair fluttered aimlessly around her face like a thrashing raven. She was a dried-out statue, contemplating the lost horizon as if her heart were anchored to that departed shore by a tether stretching thinner by the second.

Just when Freya thought it might snap, Garnet spoke, her voice a tiny balloon cast out and swallowed by the sky. “He… will come back, right? He promised…”

So did Fratley, once upon a time. A bitter and terrible piece of Freya wanted to say, ‘Now you know how it feels,’ but Garnet didn’t deserve that. She did nothing to deserve a piece of that sorrow. If Freya could have done anything to rescue her from the lonesome road that lied ahead, she would, but there was nothing to say. All her experience in loss meant nothing to the bereft young girl. All Freya could do was wrap an arm around her cold shoulders and watch the stars fall to the sea until neither could stand or weep any more.

At least *he* had the decency to look back, just once, before walking away.

('…Til we meet again.')

Thus the eight warriors' long, arduous, yet exciting journey had come to an end, and everyone went home, even if "home" was more difficult for some to settle than others. Freya's remaining connection with the group consisted of a handful of letters, most of them from Eiko. The little summoner could be just as effervescent in writing as she was in speech, and Freya was at first surprised that Cid and Hilda wanted to adopt such a rambunctious child. Then again, Eiko suited the eccentric pair well. It was nice to read about Lindblum's bolstered recovery, the new airships Cid was producing, and even the Tantalus troupe, who had resumed their usual tours around the Mist Continent.

The last Freya had seen of the band of actor-thieves was also the last she had seen of Vivi, when they parted ways at the Black Mage Village. Baku and his "boys" reportedly searched and toiled around the collapsed Iifa Tree for two weeks straight before retiring to Lindblum. Freya couldn't imagine their crushed spirits after finding nothing of their fallen brother.

Vivi wrote her once, "Just checking to see how things are going," and the impression from his

quaint letter was that he was staying well occupied with the other Black Mages and Genomes. According to him, “They still have a lot to learn, but we’re all getting along like a big family.”

There was virtually no contact with the others, murmurs in the pubs and amongst her soldiers notwithstanding. Quina probably didn’t know how to write a letter, and there was no way Amarant would have bothered—Freya knew him *that* well, at least. Everything she gathered about the infamous bounty hunter was through rumors and wanted posters; both meant that he was still alive and “at large,” which was all the dragon knight needed to light a small, knowing grin.

The greatest surprise was the letter not from Garnet, but from Beatrix. Her relationship with Alexandria’s general was strained yet understanding—it was not so easy to forgive everything, but they had enough respect for each other’s backgrounds and interests to put the past aside. Besides, they had shared a few (secret) chuckles over Captain Steiner, whose antics with his Pluto Knights were endlessly entertaining.

Beatrix’s letter appeared more out of courtesy than any presumed friendship, however, as it related

to Freya the condition of Alexandria, its strengthening relationship with Burmecia, and most significantly the condition of its queen (“reserved and melancholy, yet determined to serve her people.”) Freya supposed that if she asked Garnet in person, she would say that everything was fine.

Just fine. Many months later, and everything was fine. Never “great” or ‘marvelous’ or “terrific” or simply “swell.”

…Or easy, or clear, or bright or carefree again. Those were sunny words. Freya lived in the rain.

“I have a letter for Freya, kupo!”

Freya nearly jumped at the moogle popping up from under the nearest rock. She sighed, accepting the break in her reverie with a gracious nod as the Mognet carrier handed her an envelope. “You’re a tough person to find, kupo! Have a nice day!” The sprite bustled away on its tiny wings, leaving Freya alone.

How convenient—another letter. From whom? Freya tore it open, noting the Alexandrian royal crest stamped at the top. This time, it was Garnet herself. It was hard to decipher the point of the correspondence through the delicate, erudite

penmanship, until a single line reached out of the formalities and grabbed Freya by the throat.

Vivi stopped. I'm sorry.

No finesse, no gentle delivery, no flowery obituary, no tired euphemisms. Garnet didn't even write "my condolences," which would have been slightly more proper in this context, but not even a queen—especially not this queen—could distance herself from such an event with such shallow sympathy. The only kindness was the Black Mages' invention, "stopped," although whether that choice of word was out of fondness or reluctance Freya could not read. She couldn't read anything past that.

Stopped. Gone. How inevitable. How piquant. It was just fine, wasn't it? Freya could scream it across town and no one would care; there was no love for a black mage in her country. She would rather scream it to the plains, to the mountains, to the rain. Maybe the lizard men and ghosts would listen and spare a fraction of her grief, even though all the men, beasts and rats of Burmecia weren't altogether worth half of that nine-year-old boy with the firefly eyes, sage and sorrowful. When she opened her mouth to curse the clouds—the fates that deemed it fitting to take the bright and young away from this world and let

the heavens weep—there were no words, after all. Beneath her rage and above her despair the only thing she could think was:

What would *he* say?

Freya did not know. She stood like a stump, dead and rooted to the ground, knotted fingers clenching that piece of paper until it bled ink. Here she was, one more link broken from the chains of her existence, and she hated that now—even now, especially now—trying to remember Vivi made her think of *him*.

('You've definitely taught me to take life more seriously.')

Sometimes she hated his name. Sometimes she wished she'd never met him. Sometimes she wished she knew the question her soul was trying so desperately to answer.

Here she was, torn in half—half a person living half a life, not wanting to go home and not wanting to leave it behind. Here she was, stuck on a hill between home and country—between a lover's chivalry and a boy's fuzzy, crude affection. Half of everything Fratley ever meant to her was gone, and half of everything the ribbon ever meant to her was

gone as well, taken down to the depths of Gaia by the boy with the golden mane and rakish grin and coral eyes and chocobo musk. Both promised to come back, and neither ever did.

Freya felt like she lost both halves.

She sat down, took off her helmet and watched the rain.

A/N: Corrected. Thanks Robshi!

13. Paradise

A/N: Recommended reading: CrimsonCobweb's "Birdsong." Relevant to the chapter at hand, short and (bitter)sweet, something I have yet to master. *cough*

Sometimes, quite frankly, she couldn't stand to look at him.

"You're leaving?"

It was a terrible thought, terrible to realize in the ashen twilight dawning over her bunk, and too terrible to tell him that morning when he approached with her cup of tea.

"Yes. There are things I wish to observe for myself—things outside Burmecia."

He didn't deserve to be shunned, especially by her. He hadn't done anything criminal. If anything, he was being as polite as possible, rapping tidily on the door and begging permission before entering (after the first year of sleeping in a communal tent with the other soldiers, she was finally afforded her

own room inside the palace. She wasn't sure if she appreciated the privacy or not.) It just happened that this morning, instead of finding Freya in her robe, Fratley discovered her in full travel attire, satchel stuffed with potions and spear strapped to her back. She stood in a smoky silhouette before the single window, a vertical slit hewn from the bricks like the core of a dragon's ponderous eye.

He didn't sound wary or suspicious, just curious. "Oh? What sort of things?"

It wasn't that he was awful, or cruel, or said the wrong things—he was a perfect gentleman all the time—perhaps too perfect. He was ever striving to mend what was lost and build their relationship anew, even if that amounted to a lot of hours sitting with her and wondering what was the best thing to say. She could always tell when he was thinking too hard—grasping at the gossamer threads in the attic of his mind—by the downcast grimace and contemplative furrow of his muzzle. Sometimes he would stand in the same spot for ages with a hand to his head, a vexed pinch to his brow, and if Freya asked what was the matter he would dismiss her kindly with, "It's nothing, dear. Just a headache."

He could be very thoughtful… and Freya could be the same. She scratched her chin, considering her practiced excuse. “For one, I would like to see how the monster population has thinned out since the Mist has disappeared.”

Fratley regarded her for a ridiculous while, a tray of teacups balanced in his arms while his nose crinkled with that same lost expression that tired Freya to pieces. She sharply threw her gaze out the window before her tongue lashed out instead, though all the dragon’s eye could see was a palette of gloomy clouds. She’d been waiting months into years, now, for the man to make up his mind—about her, the past, anything—but the only thing Fratley seemed committed to was his knighthood. It was the only thing he could remember with any clarity, and thus it became the foundation for his whole persona.

Once Freya asked, to test him, *“If not dragon knights, what are we?”*
“Why, we are Burmecians,” he answered as a matter of course.
“And then what?”

The man was stumped to silence for the rest of the hour. She was annoyed with his lack of response,

but held her peace and allowed him all the time to forget he needed.

Finished with his bout of thought, Fratley perked his ears and announced punctiliously, “I shall accompany you, then.”

“No.” Freya didn’t mean to say it so quickly. “By all means, remain here. Our soldiers in the city are limited, and there might yet be a call for a dragon knight. Let us not deprive the prime minister of both of us.”

Unlike Lindblum, Alexandria and Cleyra, Burmecia was spared an eidolon’s wrath, although this merely meant that there was more blood than rubble to clean up. An eidolon practiced sweeping destruction; the black mage army practiced meticulous slaughter. It almost took longer to dig all the graves than to restore the palace, and though there were not as many material assets that needed repair, Burmecia’s reconstruction lagged behind the other nations for sheer lack of manpower. It would be generations, surely, before the population regained its strength in numbers, and until then the royal order of dragon knights would remain an endangered breed.

Fratley could be as understanding as he was thoughtful. His ears bowed in acknowledgement. “I see. Shall you be gone long?”

Freya could swear until the moon shone over Burmecia that she would return as soon as possible, lest either of them ever be abandoned again, but it sounded as hollow in her mind as it must have in his. Suddenly she felt too old for such childish promises. It was amazing how those courtyard vows of fidelity, like most things sprung in one’s youth, burned passionately yet inevitably to naught.

“As long as necessary.”

“Oh. Freya, I…” He paused to collect the right words.

“Yes?” She was too quick, too terse, testing him again. Perhaps it was her fault. Perhaps she was too impatient. Perhaps he was too patient. She could never determine whether they were trying too hard or not enough. The air shifted with her voice, the weight of the whole room wedging the two apart, and Fratley’s dark eyes vitrified under the pressure. He always fell back on courtesy whenever she stymied him, which was despairingly often, and she could practically *smell* him yielding to her again.

"…I shall not hold you. I wish you well on your journey. I hope you do not for…" Fratley faltered, very nearly about to say the wrong thing for once in his life. He shifted on his feet, flicked his tail and straightened with a tall breath, brimming with some prodigal apology. "I pray Burmecia calls you home soon."

It wasn't right—she knew it, and she sensed that he knew it, too. He was kind enough to let her go, yet not brave enough to stop her. If not a dragon knight, what was he, then? She couldn't ask for too much; she didn't want to break him. He was trying so hard to be someone he wasn't anymore (or was he ever?) just for her sake, while she was trying so hard to accept him as he was, for his sake—it was like picking at a mutual sore, the pretence only hurting them both.

"I'm sure it shall. Sir Fratley, if you would do me one kindness while I'm away…"

"Anything."

Whatever affection developed for one another between the past and the present, Freya needed not only time to sort it from her precious illusions, but space. She needed a good excuse as well, but 'I need space' was a little too trite. Fratley didn't deserve

that. Whether he deserved the truth, she had not made up her mind. It was a little too terrible.

Two years passed, and Fratley still didn't know who he was. What was he, then, to her? A knight, a friend, a companion? A kindred soul? Was she looking for a shining knight from some mawkish fairytale, to sweep her off her feet? Is that what she truly desired in her youth, above and beyond her duty? Did he ever wish the same, or was it all just a fancy? It was too much to believe anymore.

He was a worthy dragon knight, a good friend and a steady companion, but he didn't treat her like a lover; he treated her like he owed her a lover.

That was probably why, on the eighth moon following Queen Garnet til Alexandros' eighteenth birthday and a certain someone's dramatic return, she picked up her spear and left.

"…Please do not dwell too much on what is not there."

To be fair, she didn't look back.

It was easy going from there, like rolling down a hill. Freya left the shadow of her homeland behind

and ventured the countryside, hunting monsters and rendering her services to any small village on the way. The relief and freedom were difficult to express—it was something she had missed, all the wandering with none of the Mist—although the more fond memories she dug up in her path, the more she remembered what was missing from this open, carefree lifestyle.

She went northeast, to find it again.

It had been nine months and a lifetime since she crossed North Gate into Alexandria. She was last there for the play, the grand finale and the banquet that followed. The two stars of the show sat at the head of the table while the whole country toasted to their joy. It was a perfect, bittersweet reunion, and Freya was simply glad to have played a part, however meagre it seemed in hindsight. It was nice, the people of Alexandria said, to watch their queen cry tears of joy, for a change.

The whole time Zidane and Garnet were adorably inseparable, although this made it impossible to catch either of them alone. That was probably best for Zidane, since the first thing Freya intended to do was thrash him senseless for making everyone fret over his demise. The dragon knight managed a few,

pecking exchanges with her friends-cum-comrades (including the reclusive Amarant, the hot-tempered Lani and Stiltzkin, the traveling moogle), but there was no room for secrets among the group of heroes, and before she knew it the birthday celebrations had wrapped up and everyone went home.

Watching the curtain fall. Going home. Living "happily ever after." It wasn't what she expected, after all. Freya was still missing… something.

Now that enough time had passed for things to settle down, the city of Alexandria was on the threshold of normalcy. Unlike Lindblum, which could be loud and garish on the topside and louder and sootier on the underside, Alexandria retained some of the quaint, rustic fashions of its border villages. It was a hotchpotch of farmers and craftsmen, all building from the same bricks in jagged rows and on top of older, ruined establishments, and in this way the town endured to pass on to its children like a giant patchwork quilt. It was worn and disorderly, yet lively in ways that Burmecia was not, and even though Freya had passed through before, there was always something novel to behold with each visit.

Freya sauntered through the sun-dappled streets, poking around shops and sampling the dry urban flavors. She was in no hurry, following her light heart like a child's wayward balloon. She bought a lily from a flower girl, played cards with the owner of a perfume shop, ate lunch at a pub overrun with moogles, and stopped by Ruby's Mini-Theatre, where pleasantries were abundant. Freya got an earful of gossip (half of which she didn't understand through the lady's bawdy accent) before finally taking leave for the castle.

It would be nice to chat with the young queen and her "actor companion" (who was 'shacked up in that castle, awl right,' according to Ruby), however when the guards at the moat pressed for the intention of her visit, the dragon knight floundered. "Hmm… I'd like an audience with the queen, I suppose," she said at length, somewhat embarrassed for her lack of purpose. Did she need a good reason to see her friends?

Thankfully she was accepted, and shortly after checking her armor, spear and helm at the foyer, Captain Steiner caught wind of her arrival and rushed to grab the queen's ear. Garnet greeted her with a very enthusiastic if… less-than-royal embrace, took her by the arm and then dragged her

around the castle's florid courtyards, regaling Freya with all the happy tidings of the past few weeks. Her manners were exuberant yet refined—a curious, delightful blend of two personalities, each drawn from experience within and beyond the castle. She bubbled and curtsied like a princess, yet laughed and tossed her head like a rogue, and whether she preferred to be called Garnet or Dagger depended on her mood and company. Freya was too captivated by the queen's alacrity and worldly graces to interject once, although eventually she was prompted by her busy questions.

"So, how is everything in Burmecia? How is Sir Fratley doing?"

Freya's ears flickered as she hid her gaze behind a veil of white hair. "Fine. Both are fine," she replied, Garnet never minding her subdued tone. She nodded and indicated some shrubs behind a latticed fence. "I wish we could borrow some of that rain. The flowers desperately need it. Summer's coming early this year, isn't it? It's scorching already. I hope the roses don't all wilt. They were my mother's favorite."

"Hmm," Freya nodded, agreeing to change the subject. A joke tugged the corner of her lips while a

shadow tugged the corner of her mind—Garnet was in an awful hurry to talk about everything under the sun except… “Speaking of rotten vegetables, where is that oaf, Zidane?”

“Oh!” Garnet tittered and covered her mouth, at a comic loss. ‘Of course, you’d want to see him, right? Zidane is, well… “She scanned the yard, long hair swishing against green satin, and looked as if the boy were bound to spring from the bushes at any moment.” Zidane is hiding around here somewhere —the gods only know where. He likes to make himself scarce these days.’ She then tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and gave a tiny, forlorn sigh, staring into some far-away clouds. “Sometimes I worry…”

Freya was disturbed by this crack in her chipper facade. “Is something wrong?”

Garnet shook her head, clasped her hands over the front of her dress and answered neatly, “Oh no, nothing’s wrong, really. Zidane has been wonderful company; I’m glad he’s decided to stay here. I had missed him dearly, and was truly happy to have him come home. He was so happy, too…” Something about the past tense rang oddly, but before Freya could give it a name Garnet’s sedate laugh distracted

her. “It hadn’t been the same without him, you know?”

“Yes, I think I know what you mean,” Freya conceded, and she crossed her arms over the squeamish inkling in the pit of her stomach. “What is the matter, then?”

“It’s just…” Another sigh broke her composure, and the eloquent queen was reduced to unfinished sentences. “He’s stayed here nine months, now, but it doesn’t seem like he’s adjusting very well to… It’s hard to explain… I never really expected him to, because he’s not… He didn’t grow up in a place like this. I know I don’t get away from the castle much—there’s so much to do—but it’s just, sometimes I wonder if it wouldn’t be better for him if…”

Freya watched her tie her fingers into an abject knot, an achingly familiar regression, and a frown crumpled the Burmecian’s countenance. “If what?”

Garnet shrugged off Freya’s empathetic look with an abashed smile. “Oh, never mind. He would say I’m being silly. I don’t know what’s come over me. I hadn’t confided those things to anyone.” She tilted a coy glance up to her friend. “There must be something honest about you.”

Freya didn’t know how to accept such a compliment, so she graciously stammered, “Oh, well, I…”

She was spared the effort when a maid wheeled up to the pair. “Your Majesty, a summons to—”

“Oh! Right, I positively forgot.” Garnet stood on her toes and bestowed Freya a friendly kiss on the cheek. The dragon knight appeared suitably ruffled while Garnet excused herself with a very *Dagger*-ish grin. ‘I have to go—a queen’s work is never done, after all.’ She then bustled away behind the maid, shouting back, “You will stay for dinner, yes? It’s good to see you again, Freya!”

Freya waved impotently after her. “Ahm, yes, it’s…” Too late, Garnet was around the corner and gone. “…Hmm. Haha, she certainly has changed.”

Left to her own devices in the gardens, Freya explored the flowerbeds until her nose was merrily acquainted with all the springtime flora Alexandria had to offer. After a particularly intoxicating brush with a patch of pungent purple flowers (the name of which Freya would have to gather from Garnet later), she stepped onto a patio and nearly stumbled over her missing friend, sitting supine upon a park bench and snoring to the high sun.

Freya approached on silent, padded feet, appraising the sleeping boy with musing mischief.

Well, that label no longer seemed fair. Zidane wasn't technically a boy anymore. He was… what now, eighteen? Nineteen? When they last met, Freya figured he still had some growing to do, but apparently not. He would never have the muscle or girth of some of his "bros," nor would he ever be as tall or shapely as his "brother." That wasn't necessarily a bad thing (she didn't want to picture him in a thong—that was too much for her imagination to handle.) It just made him look… unique, boyish. Like he would never grow up.

Despite living in luxury, the castle didn't make him any softer in the meantime—just a little more pale and thin than Freya remembered. He was dressed in a simple white shirt and denim breeches (almost too plain for his bombastic self) and looked well-washed (a commendable victory on Garnet's behalf.) Even his normally dingy tail was now a clean, flaxen color. She couldn't tell if he had lost his healthy tan or if that's just how white his skin looked with all the dirt finally washed off, but something between Iifa and Alexandria must have sapped some life out of him. A Zidane without the street-grime and foppish lace seemed all too…

unnatural.
(What made her stop and wonder more than any of that, though, were the dusky smudges under his eyes, and how thin his skin seemed where the sun touched his collarbone…)

Her head fuzzy with pollen and the element of surprise still intact, Freya paced around him. Once her gaze lighted upon the red tie in his hair (the very same she gave him, perhaps) she found her game. She stole it back, feather-light fingers unraveling his ponytail, and then Freya found his monkey-tail threaded between the slats of the wooden bench. All she had to do was tie the furry limb (oh-so-carefully, lest he wake up) to the back leg of the bench, and the trap was set. What a devilish scheme! If only he should wake up with a start, trip and fall on his face —then he would taste how awful it feels to mess with someone else's precious ribbon.

Freya was about to stoop to that very thing when she bit her lip and held back. That was rather spiteful of her, wasn't it? Besides, they had already paid each other back for that transgression; she could not forget that rainy day in a million years. However amusing the image of Zidane tripping on his own tail, Freya changed her mind about the prank and let him go. She wasn't very good at

practical jokes, anyway; they required a malignant brand of craftiness that Freya lacked.

Nonetheless, she was infected with a silly itch, and to work it out of her system she started to play with his hair, combing out silky-gold tangles with the fine tips of her claws. Zidane stirred under her attention, fingers and nose twitching as he purred in his sleep. Freya clamped down a grin, driving the word “cute” out of her mind. She developed a weaving pattern to her strokes, his hair so thick and soft that her fingers sank in to the hilt, and she reckoned it would be fairly easy to braid…

Disappointingly, Zidane woke up before she could put that notion into effect. He shakily flexed his knees and elbows and murmured, “Mmm, baby, that feels good… Did you grow your nails out?”

Freya smirked. “No, I’m fairly sure I’ve always kept them this long.”

Zidane’s eyes snapped open—wild and crystallized blue—and alarm dilated into surprise once he twisted around to meet her. “F-Freya!”

“Surprise, monkey boy. You need to cut your hair again,” she snipped.

“Eheh, yeah…” He rubbed the back of his neck, drowsy and bemused. “Wow, I didn’t know you were coming to visit.”

“It was an unplanned excursion, you might say.” She strolled around the bench and took a seat next to him. He followed her the whole way with a wary, evaluating look, eyes roving from her uncovered head to the ribbon on her tail.

“Cool. So…” He licked his lips and drummed his fingers on his knees before coming up with the best opening. “…What’s up?” She was grateful that he didn’t ask about Burmecia or *him* right away, as others did, although his next remark made her want to hit him just as well. “I know my studliness is too great to resist, but you didn’t have to come all this way.”

She tipped her nose and scoffed, “Oh, please. Like I’d have to leave home to be able to see your colossal ego, rearing up over the Aerbs Mountains. It’s big enough to make Atmos gag.”

He leaned back with a snicker. “Ouch, sharp as ever. I knew I missed you for a good reason.”

“What, to cut you down? I suppose somebody has to do it.” She crossed her legs and propped her

arm on the back of the seat, likewise getting comfortable. “So, you’ve been living here in the castle, I gather.”

“Yeah. Got my own room and everything, right down the hall from Dagger’s.”

“I see. Includes free board and conjugal visits?”

He wagged his eyebrows. “You better believe it.”

“Scandalous,” she remarked, carrying the laconic conversation. “I’m surprised the captain and general haven’t raised six levels of hell over the impropriety of it all.”

“Oh, I know how to give Rusty hell, believe me. If I so much as mention General Beatits I get him right where I want him.”

“You’re going to give that man a heart attack one day.”

“Hey, it’ll make him more interesting.”

“Zidane!”

He chortled. “What? I’m kidding.”

“That is an awful joke.”

“Heh…” He rubbed his nose and glanced aside, dismissing it. Then he turned and asked, “Seriously, what are you doing here?”

The sobriety of the question paused her. There was something in his trenchant stare that drew Freya too close to the truth, and she shied away. Did he suspect…?

The first answer deep enough to convey her feelings was, “Nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.”

Whether he believed her or not, Zidane rolled his shoulders with a yawn, easygoing nature settling cat-like over him again. “What a coincidence—me too.”

“That’s because you’re a lazy bum,” Freya quibbled.

The irony tickled him. “Oho, and what does that make you?”

“I am…” She rolled her wrist, conjuring some poetic title to cover her heart’s unease. “…a wandering spirit.”

“Really? And what about your boyfriend?”

Freya wasn’t sure if that was the figurative last straw or if it was just Zidane who could rub her the wrong way, but it wasn’t *just fine* anymore, and she

snapped, “He’s not my boyfriend,” like she’d meant to say so all along. She couldn’t even joke about it.

Zidane looked struck. “Is it that bad?”

Why did he have to have the gall to ask, as if it were any of his business? Girlfriend, boyfriend… those labels never suited her and Fratley. She once thought they were better than that, but not… She didn’t know anymore. Returning home—even over the brief course of her mind—only dampened her spirits. “I’d rather not speak of it.”

“Oh, okay…” Zidane gave up his strange, scrutinizing look with another shrug. “Whatever floats your boat, babe.”

She squeaked at his flippancy. “Hmph! Regent Cid was right about you—still have the manners of an oglop.”

Zidane cocked an eyebrow, only interested in the first part of her statement. “You’ve been talking to Cid?”

“He’s written me once or twice.” Freya reached over and pinched his ear. “Which is more than I can say for you, you illiterate scamp. Why haven’t you sent a letter?”

Zidane batted her hand away. “Ow, okay, sorry!” He rubbed the side of his head and said sulkily, “I meant to… I’ve been distracted!”

“I would love to know how a shiftless bum with nothing to do but ogle Her Majesty’s *royal assets* can be distracted.”

“Sheesh, I said I’m sorry! You are so mean today.” He fell into her side with a cloying flutter of his eyelashes. “Why, have you missed me that much, my darling?”

“Oh, shut up! You are awful.” Freya smartly punched his arm, though this didn’t push him off.

“Hehehe.”

Freya sighed, enduring him, and they lapsed into a placid spell. She let her arm fall over his shoulder, listening to the boy’s relaxed breathing and the happy trill of songbirds in the surrounding gardens. The sun was bearing strong on the mica-slate cobbles of the patio, and flecks of refracted pink and cerulean splashed the red and yellow blossoms clinging to the side wall. Freya considered taking off her coat, but she was much too comfortable to upset their position, and before she could reconsider a new scent grazed her nostrils. It was warm, delicious,

familiar, and—she had to lean closer to be sure—coming from *Zidane*.

She stuck her snout in his hair, rooting through the alluring aroma while her mind toiled over its ingredients. It had an artificial tang to it, which was reassuring because there was no way the monkey could smell so nice on his own, but there was still a heady, natural quality about it that drove her mad—mulled her senses and made her heart skip a little faster. Freya couldn't rest until she figured it out, and her hand rooted in the boy's ribs to hold him still while she sniffed his scalp all over.

Zidane, just waking up to her nosiness, heartily objected, "Whoa, cool off there! Doesn't this strike you as a little *intimate*?"

"What kind of shampoo do you use?" she belted out.

He froze, nonplussed. "Huh? The hell?"

"Your shampoo, Tribal," she reiterated sternly. "What am I smelling?"

"Geez, I dunno what's in it," he said defensively, like a child caught by a schoolmistress. "It's just some stuff off the shelf in a glass bottle. Dagger makes me use it."

“It’s absolutely delectable. Where can I get it?”

“I can ask Dagger to give you a bottle. You gonna let me go now?”

She hummed into his nape, “Mmm, not yet. You smell so good, I can’t resist.”

“Man, I wished the stuff worked this good with Dagger.”

Freya continued her investigation. “Is that camomile and honey? Camomile is positively my favorite.”

His tail corkscrewed, clearly agitated. “I don’t know, woman! You’re not gonna eat me, are you?”

“Ahaha, am I making Zidane Tribal uncomfortable? Perish the thought. Besides, if I were trying to be intimate, I would be more like this…” Freya released him only long enough to sit up, slide into his lap and fasten her arms around his neck. Even sitting down, her tall, lean shape dwarfed the boy, and Zidane made a petty, disarmed noise as he accommodated her weight. Freya licked the rim of his ear in response, relishing his frustration almost as much as his newfound scent.

He shuddered beneath her, his breath suddenly taxed by something more than the dragon knight's heaviness. "Whoa… You are seriously screwing with me, aren't you?"

Freya grinned wickedly and brushed his bangs away from his eyes, curling a blonde lock around one finger. "Such a contradiction. If you *were* one with whom I would indeed wish to 'screw,' how could I possibly go about it *seriously*, hmm?"

"I have no idea what you just said, but either you're drunk or I've just discovered cat-nip for rats."

Not denying either, she quipped, "You could make a fortune." Freya surveyed the vicinity for any prying eyes before resuming her olfactory indulgence. Zidane did an admirable job of holding his ground while she buried her nose in his hair, although eventually he protested, "Hey! How long do you think I'm gonna sit here and take this?"

Teasing him was becoming quite a sport; Freya didn't want to give it up just yet. "Hmm, I don't know… It's been a long time since I've had you all to myself…"

His eyes widened in a flash of mock panic. “Oh gods, you ARE going to eat me. And all this time I thought it would be Quina.” He paddled his feet and tossed distressed looks around the patio, shouting, “Quick, somebody HEL—”

She smothered his outcry with a hand. “Oh shush, you fool.” At his helpless grimace she relented, pulling her hand away and shifting her hips so that the bench absorbed most of her weight. “I’m only playing—and I just mean to say I missed you. I’m allowed to get sentimental once in a while, aren’t I?”

Zidane fidgeted with his Burmecian burden, overwhelmed by her honey-herb humor. He was always the one “playing,” so this reversal must have been too alien for the boy to handle. “Sure, I guess…” he acquiesced, though he really lost it when she started grooming his hair with her tongue. “H-Hey! What are you doing?!”

Freya was having more fun making him squirm than anything (although she began to suspect the influence of some certain purple flowers.) “Mphb, hold still. You almost taste as good as you smell.”

“What?!” Zidane turned a shade of pink she’d never seen before and began to struggle. Freya easily secured him, flipping the boy across her lap

and holding him snugly to her bosom. “Mmm, I’ve forgotten how little you are. You’re so light and easy to hold.”

“Someone help!” he pleaded to the outside world, thrashing his skinny limbs like a drowning rodent. “She’s gone crazy!”

“Mphln,” she chided him between mouthfuls of honey-hair, “I said shush—you’re making a scene.”

“That’s the idea!”

They must have truly made a sight by the time Beatrix arrived from the covered walkway adjoined to the patio. She ambled up to the benched pair, head tilted to an intrigued degree and hand braced on her sheathed sword as if to intervene by force, although the look on her face rather suggested she just walked in on a pair of rutting chocobos.

“…Lady Freya? What’s going on?”

Zidane stuck an arm out of the swamping red coat and waved frantically. “Beatrix! Help me.”

Freya merely picked her chin up out of the mop of disheveled monkey and stated in her defense, “He’s delicious. I’m not letting him go.”

The general’s eyebrow disappeared into her hair. “…I see. Well give him back in time for dinner, understood?” she warned wryly, and then walked out the way she came.

Zidane sputtered, “Gah-wha—hey!! Okay, don’t help me out—I see how it is. I won’t forget this, Beatrix!”

Freya assumed the villain’s part, her rich cackle resounding through the courtyard. “Ahaha, no one’s coming to save you now.”

“Ack, you witch!”

“You wastrel.”

“Having a nice vocabulary doesn’t make you any less of a wi—oh, ah! Really Freya, that—aaaa—tickles!”

“I guarantee this’ll be easier for both of us if you cease your resistance.”

The Genome accepted defeat with a whimper, falling slack in her clutches. Unfortunately it wasn’t as fun once he quit fighting back, but that didn’t keep Freya from sopping up all the tasty shampoo she desired. After a few minutes Zidane’s embarrassed muttering took on an odd, husky pitch;

she was close enough to feel the rumbling in the back of his throat. “Ah, uhm… If you don’t cut it out I might start to enjoy this, if you know what I mean.”

That finally made Freya hesitate. She pulled back to study his flushed, earnest complexion, only grasping the consequences of her ‘playing’ for the first time. “…Oh.” She set the boy upright, replacing him where he sat earlier. “Now *that* would be a shame.”

Zidane smoothed down his besieged hair with a flustered wince (and without success—several tufts stood out like wayward reeds, making his head look like a bird’s nest.) “Gee, ya think?” he squawked, although the unoiled hitch in his voice insinuated that he might not have minded those consequences as much as he ought. “What’s gotten into you, Freya?”

“Oh, I don’t know…” she confessed with a gusty sigh. ‘Flowers, perhaps. My head feels rather fuzzy today. Or maybe I was bitten by a silly bug.’ It had been a long time since she had done something utterly ludicrous just for the hell of it (such as rough-housing a queen’s consort in her royal gardens), and Freya didn’t want to admit it so plainly, but it felt

good. She winked and poked her tongue out at him. “Or maybe you’re just a rotten influence.”

Zidane offered an impudent grin. “Hey, I’ll take credit for that.”

“You would.” She pulled the boy close again, not quite ready to part from that balmy scent. “Mmm, just let me sit and enjoy the flowers and your lovely shampoo while I can.”

“Mmm… kay,” Zidane obliged, and they sat peacefully, cooling off and watching lemon-leaf moths flit between the cultured vines. It was nice to have something warm and real in her arms for a change—a little slice of the sun—rather than getting hugged by cold iron and kissed by wet clouds.

Fratley kissed her, once—since his return, that is. It wasn’t characteristic of him because he had never done it before, even when their relationship was fresh enough to set butterflies loose in her stomach every time she saw him (among other romantic clichés. Gods, did she really make such a feeble teenager?)

She couldn’t remember what prompted it—she thinks he was trying to be impulsive, and it worked—it caught her off-guard, at least. If Freya had been

in a more prepared state of mind she would have returned the gesture, but in her moment of surprise he bowed and sidled away, as if ashamed of his own boldness. She forgave him the incident because it was, well… *cute* of someone who was supposed to be a strapping dragon knight, and that wasn't a word Freya tossed around lightly.

A brooding sigh must have betrayed her, because Zidane's next query was, "Uh… you alright?"

She shook her head. "Nothing… Just feels good to get out of the rain."

A baffled look crossed him, and he held a hand to her brow. "What? Do you have a fever or something? It hasn't rained all month."

She brushed it away. "Oh, cut it out. I am *fine*," she bluffed, relieved to be brought back to the present. "Please quit ruining the moment."

He snickered. "I wasn't aware we were having a 'moment'."

"Does it bother you?"

His quiet, thoughtful reply surprised her. "…No. Not really. It's kinda nice."

All this sunshine *was* nice, but it wasn't home, was it? Freya wondered if she would ever miss the rain again.

Zidane yawned, relapsing into drowsing, and Freya was reminded of something she should have asked from the start.

"What's been troubling you?"

He blinked back, the shadows around his eyes more prominent in his indolence. "Huh? Nothin', why?"

"You look like you've been losing sleep, is all."

"Oh." He chuckled dimly and self-consciously scrubbed his eyes. "Heh, is it that obvious?"

"You *were* taking a nap on a park bench in broad daylight."

"Hey, I can sleep wherever I want, thank you very much!"

"Obstinate as ever, aren't you? At any rate, you look exhausted. It's written all over your face."

"Heh… Can't put anything past you, huh?" He reclined on her arm and mumbled, "Mmrm, just tired. Been thinking a lot."

“About what?”

His tail flicked once and his shoulders slightly tensed. “…Stuff.”

He didn’t elaborate, and before she could ask he spoke again, sounding more alert than he appeared. “Things have really slowed down for us, haven’t they?”

Freya had never thought of her current lifestyle in terms of speed, but “slow” did seem terribly fitting. It was amazing how simple a warrior’s life became in the absence of war or strife. She would never wish to relive any of those battles, much less shed another drop of blood, but now that the long struggle was over, all that was left to do was… *go home*.

“True… I never imagined it would be like this.” She didn’t have to explain—he knew what she meant. She read him too easily: the pale skin, the plain clothes—he even seemed to have lost weight, which was absurd for a guest of royalty. He was tired, and it wasn’t just from lack of sleep. The dark circles under his eyes were a mirror of her own discomfort—her own restlessness. Freya figured it might not be long, now, before he either broke or broke free. Nothing could hold Zidane forever—not queen, country or even love.

‘*Not even giant imploding trees.*’ “You never did say how you survived, back at the Iifa Tree.”

He sat up and passed her an inscrutable look, eyes sharp yet cloudy like shattered quartz, and she would never be able to decipher what was behind them in a hundred lifetimes—sometimes not even Zidane was simple. His carefree guise was back in an instant, though, and there was no mistaking that wily grin. “Maybe if you come with me, I’ll tell you.”

She frowned, vexed by his elusive answer. “Go with you? Where?”

Zidane hunched over the edge of the seat. “I’ve been thinking… ’bout taking a little trip. I’m going to go find Choco again.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it’s been a while… Probably gonna take him out to some lagoon—middle-of-nowhere, you know… See where the road takes me. Who knows, maybe I’ll find where Amarant’s been hiding out all this time and pester the hell out of ’im. That guy knows how to stay lost.”

Freya sniffed, holding back an amused smile. “Sounds like another of your mindless adventures.”

“Heheh, yep.” He seemed satisfied with this assessment.

She didn’t really mean to, but Freya had to ask. “And Dagger?”

“What about Dagger?” he responded testily, his tail slapping the bench with a louder crack than Freya credited the fluffy appendage, and she recoiled in shock.

The boy shrank from his outburst with a strained sigh, tail tucking under his knee as guilt skittered over his features. He ran a hand through his hair and retracted, “I didn’t mean it like that… She just can’t come, is all. She’s busy, being queen and all… I don’t—I mean, we’ve been getting along great, but… I’m useless around here.” He looked up and away. “This is something I want to do on my own.”

Freya folded her arms, retreating to her pensive space while he fell quiet, sullenly contemplating the sky.

’There are things I wish to observe for myself—things outside…’
’He was so happy, too…’
’…I shall not hold you.’
’…sometimes I wonder if it wouldn’t be better for

him if…'
'You smile the most when you're lying.'

Suddenly she understood more than she wanted to. "I see… So that's how it is. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," he said frankly—then, with a pang of what sounded too much like regret, "…'s just funny, how things work out. Life isn't always that simple."

Funny too, how he seemed to have grown, perhaps a little, in ways that belied his childish looks. "The open road can be a lonely place, you know."

"Yeah. I mean, I'll have Choco, but…" Just like flipping a switch he perked up, tail arching over his back and eyes lit with bygone mischief. At a glance he looked too much like a thirteen-year-old boy she met on some dusty road so many years ago. "You wanna come with me?"

She lowered the most incredulous look she could muster. "You can't be serious."

"You know me. I'm always serious!"

She ignored that contradiction. "Just the two of us."

“And Choco!”

“Just the two of us and a *bird*.”

“Actually…” he explained shiftily, “A little moogle told me about this place called Paradise.”

“And you actually bought it?”

“Hey, it could really be out there! Who knows, maybe in some remote corner of the world nobody’s thought of exploring yet. Boss says there’s no more treasure in this world, but what does he know? There’s always something more. I mean, some of us didn’t even believe Terra existed until we went and found it.”

“So you plan to go looking for this figment of some moogle’s imagination? Where would you even begin?”

“They say only chocobos can find it. I’m gonna use Choco as a guide.”

“Who is ‘they’?”

“Well, actually, just Mene—”

“Who?”

“The moogle.”

Freya threw up her arms. “For goodness’s sake! I can’t believe you’re gullible enough to buy such a fairy tale.”

He clucked disdainfully. “Tch, won’t even give it a chance. Choco’s an excellent treasure hunter, I’ll have you know—he’s a Class A Chocobo. But hey, I’m not twisting your arm.”

She couldn’t believe it. She was considering it. “…For how long?”

Zidane shrugged, leaving it open-ended, as if setting a date would ruin the spirit of the enterprise. The way he made it sound, he might be content to never come back. He peered at her through aquamarine and slivers of gold, unspoken treasures lurking behind an evocative glance and a foxy smirk. He was ready to go—she only had to say the magic word.

“Wha’da you say?”

To go or go ahead. Rain or sun. Freya never expected the past few weeks—no, her entire life—of avoidant wanderlust to come down to a simple yes or no, but that was Zidane: making everything simple. She could say yes and never find herself again… but what would she do if she said no?

Go home. Live ‘happily ever after.’ It was easy to shrug and say life wasn’t that simple. It was harder to smile and tell the truth—to say why.

She recalled standing in a field under dipolar red and blue, the stars as her witness, and wondering which path would give her life meaning. Perhaps she had not taken the wrong path after all; perhaps she had been walking the right path for the wrong reasons. Perhaps it was impossible to atone for everything—perhaps there was nothing to atone for at all. Maybe trying to fix everything—Burmecia, Fratley, the world—wasn’t going to fix her life, in the end. All she knew for sure was that she was tired of the doldrums, of waiting to live her life. She was going to do something for herself for a change.

She clapped her hands on her knees decisively. “Sure, why the hell not. When are we leaving?”

He brightened, the tip of his tail wagging like a tired old dog’s. “Really? You serious?”

She had to size him up. She had to know for sure. She felt like she was on the brink of doing something reckless and stupid.

Zidane just had that effect on people.

Not even he could anticipate her next move, especially when she turned towards him, pinned his shoulders to the back of the bench and straddled his lap. Freya then grabbed him by the collar and pressed her mouth to his, silencing him with her long, supple tongue before he could articulate his shock.

Fratley kissed her, once. It was a slippery clack, like striking wet flint, with an almost perfunctory recoil. It was a courtly gesture, retracted as swiftly as it was delivered.

Zidane would do nothing of the sort, never too modest to pull out of a kiss, especially when it was offered by the lady rather than the other way around. At first he cringed all over, as if doused in icy water, but then he thawed out and leaned into it, grabbing back and sucking vigorously. It was like striking a match, a rough, muted swish that burned hot and down to the quick, scorching lips and fingertips.

Perhaps it was too ‘intimate,’ as he put it, but Freya knew he honestly didn’t mind, else he would have pushed her away long before now. She knew how slick Zidane could be when he really wanted to get away (he was a self-proclaimed escape artist, after all) and here he wasn’t even putting up a fight.

He took whatever was thrown at him in stride, improvising as he would on a stage. Today he was getting kissed by a Burmecian, and he filled the role like an expert, not one finger rising to stop her.

His hands tugged on her hips and his tail wrapped tightly around her ankle, making her toes curl, and Freya's last cognizant thought was *hell*, if they were going to elope, they might as well do it *properly*.

They didn't fit well, like a couple of obtuse puzzle pieces, and he was getting bothered and just anyone could have walked up and seen them and she knew it and didn't care. It was a challenge, just another contest, and Freya gladly poured herself into the task. Her thumbs traced the soft line of his jaw, claws itching to delve deeper, and she thrilled at his struggling huffs, hot breath searing her muzzle. She didn't dare quit, not even when greedy hands pushed aside her starchy coat and rode up her flank. She felt, smelled and tasted him all at once—he was warm and hard and light, a slice of the sun—a fickle ray, as brilliant as he was transient, leaving the dazzled and confused in his wake—not terribly unlike his brother, except Zidane's magic was the kind that melted the soul.

He slipped a moan into her mouth, a racy plea for more, but she cut him off there, pulling back to savor the taste of his surprise. He was blushing like a sunburnt babe and could hardly catch his breath, but there was no objection and no excuse—just quicksilver eyes gauging her back with a spark of a grin and an arrogant kink to his lips, as if it were his idea all along.

Eventually he found the nerve to speak. “I don’t know who you are or where you put the real Freya, but you can leave her there.”

If Zidane was going to be this cocky and cheeky the whole way, all the better; he was going to need that energy to keep up with her. Freya tossed her hair over her shoulders with a smug harrumph and nailed him with a straight look.

“You know me. I’m always serious.”

A/N: Not over yet! Follow-up chapter coming very very soon. Expect the content rating to go up…

14. Flying

A/N: Now rated M for a *really good reason*, no DICKING around this time. **If you were disturbed by chapters six, nine and… oh, seven I guess, you're definitely not going to like this. Proceed at your own risk.** If I were a sensible individual, I would turn around and pretend the previous chapter was the actual ending (hey, it kinda works.)

I'm sure some people are going to read ahead and be annoyed with me anyway, but one can't go about one's life (much less a 60,000-word fic) half-assed. Hopefully y'all can understand.

This is for everyone who wanted a more… explicit resolution to the story. ;)

edit: Almost forgot! Recommended reading: "One of Those Nights" by Suzume the Wanderer.

'I can't believe I'm doing this.'

He'd left a note under her door; a squiggly formality that didn't explain anything. Everything he truly meant to say was written between the lines.

Now he was standing on the docks of Alexandria's restored airship port, wearing naught but a pair of daggers, a beaten travel pack and the clothes he put on this morning. He didn't even have any money—Freya's purse was covering his ticket, and then the rest of the way they were on their own.

Zidane wasn't worried about the expenses. He could scratch up gil around every corner, lining his pockets with the mishaps of others. During his travels with Dagger, much more of their funds were obtained illicitly than either the princess or her bodyguard cared to know. Of course, Zidane wasn't completely lacking in morals, at least when it came to money. It was all for a good cause, and with Tantalus the ends always justified the means. That's just the way he was raised.

They were standing in line for the next flight to Daguerreo. The scholars' haven was ideal for researching the existence of any "Chocobo's Paradise," and it seemed like a neutral starting point, besides. Remote and obscure as it was, Daguerreo wasn't exactly a booming community, but it saw enough trade and tourism to qualify the occasional cargo ship. They were lucky to catch one the same day.

‘I don’t know what I’m thinking. I should be with Dagger. Why can’t I be happy just staying home?’

He swayed a little on his feet, tipsy with indecision that knotted his stomach and made his head swim. This was a bad time to start having second thoughts.

Freya squeezed his hand, as if to hold him up. She was geared for the long road, bearing her favorite old spear, coat armour and helmet, and he felt like a small child next to the tall dragon knight. Zidane passed her a reassuring smile that she didn’t seem to catch, since she was talking to the man in the ticket booth. “Two please.”

’…I can’t do that, can I? I can’t stay home. Dagger’s my rock, but I can’t even stay on the ground, just to be with her. I have to fly.’

Freya slid her coin across the counter, scooped up the stubs and led Zidane to the gangplank that allowed passengers on the ship.

’That’s why Freya’s here too, isn’t it? She must feel the same way. Neither of us can just…’ His vision wavered, breaking his stride for half a step, and he lost his thought.

“Com’on, you silly oaf, keep up,” Freya chided.

This was all Zidane’s idea, but his old friend more than readily took the reins. He had no idea what Freya was thinking either, but something back in Burmecia must have greatly disturbed her, to make her act out like this. Sure, she liked to travel as well as he did, but that thing she did in the garden… It just wasn’t in her nature. Or so he thought. He had to wonder, sometimes, how well he really knew Freya. He’d considered asking for her motives more than once, but then he would remember her first answer: she didn’t want to talk about it. That was fair; there were a good deal of things he wasn’t ready to talk about, either (he still hadn’t related Kuja’s last words to anyone, even Dagger.)

Maybe time would tell. Now he and Freya could be indecisive together. And if they figured something out along the way… so be it.

(He could still feel her hand on his neck, groping for a pulse while her tongue scraped the roof of his mouth, and he wasn’t going to lie—it was hot. It made him light-headed…)

Only once he walked up the plank and glimpsed Alexandria Castle’s noble crystal spire in the distance did his injured conscience petition him, *‘Don’t you still love her?’*

Yes, he answered with a thief's blind conviction. He loved Dagger like all the world, and maybe that was why he really had to go. He couldn't simply stay home, because home could not be bound by castle walls and a moat. Home was everything he'd ever seen and everywhere he'd ever been. Home was Gaia. It took him a long time to figure out the source of the malaise that stole his appetite and left him sitting up alone some nights. He was homesick, and if he stayed inside that castle much longer… he wasn't sure what would become of him, but he couldn't stand for Dagger to watch him become something he wasn't. He caught the way she looked at him sometimes, when he was gazing out a window at the birds among the clouds—that troubled ache in her kind, dark eyes. She must have known his reasons already.

Besides, he consoled himself, he wasn't running away forever. No one was his keeper; he could return to Alexandria whenever he wanted. All of Gaia was his home, and he could make himself welcome anywhere, but surely he would tire of the long roads at some point. Who knows where they'll be by then? Will she be angry with him, or happy for him? Will she move on, or wait for him? Even the slyest eagles, no matter how high they fly, have to

perch somewhere eventually, and hopefully on that day her balcony will be open.

‘I’ll come back. I promise.’

By the time they set foot on the deck of the *Cloudrunner*, he realized he was trembling. What was wrong with him? Was he getting sick? He shouldn’t have skipped breakfast…

Freya swept a nonchalant look over their vessel. It was a model dating back to the last Lindblum War, retrofitted with a steam engine that ensured its performance yet didn’t do anything about the rusty rails, the mould on the skirting or the paint flaking off the warped wooden boards of the hull. The dirigible balloon over their heads shuddered in the breeze like a giant, angry lung, and dull white sails were drooping off its skeletal frame like the moulting skin of an emaciated snake. “Huh. Not exactly a first-class airship, is it?”

“Yeah…” Zidane weakly contributed, barely able to concentrate on his surroundings anymore. He was sweating frost and his heart was wobbling like a loose wheel. Freya must have noticed his clammy hand slipping out of hers, because she stopped and peered down at him, brow tilted inquisitively. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he responded, a little too breathless for his own good, and for some reason he couldn’t quit smiling. “I’m flying.”

Dizzy. He was dizzy. That was the only way he could describe the sickly sweet thrumming in his chest and ears, the heat pooling in his abdomen and the cold spots fringing his vision. He’d never experienced anything quite like it—his nerves were stormy, lighter than air and tingly at the extremities, and he had a hunch he was going to hit the deck before he got any further.

All he had to do was blink—one long, slow blink to clear his head—and next he knew he was on his hands and knees, Freya holding him up. How did they get there so quick? It was only a second.

“Zidane!” She sounded distraught. He passed out, didn’t he? *Damnit…*

“Uh… sorry…” he apologized blandly, if just to let her know he was conscious.

A sailor working the moorage paused to toss them some lukewarm concern. “Is he okay?”

Freya hesitantly looked from him to Zidane and back. “We’re fine.” She leaned in close, inspecting

his face, her tone fraught with compunction. “What happened? You’re pale! Oh, this was a mistake…”

“N-No!” Zidane yelped, and he clambered to his feet. Now was definitely not the time to be having second thoughts. ‘It’s okay. I think I… I’m just tired.’ He had a few good ideas of what happened, but he wasn’t ready to take a scolding for any of them. “Let’s go find somewhere to sit down, okay? I’ll be fine.”

She rose with him, a dubious hand on his arm in case she had to catch him again. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah…” he said for the third time, making the effort to look her in the eyes. He hoped he looked convincing. “I wanna go.” *I still want to go with you.*

Freya huffed, shook her head and led the way again. “For heaven’s sake, don’t scare me, Zidane. Unbelievable…”

She practically carried him to a bench near the stern, where they could watch the crew finish lifting cargo and preparing the ship for departure. He and Freya might have been the only passengers this round; Zidane hadn’t seen anyone else boarding the same way. She must have asked if he needed

anything, because he vaguely heard himself say he could use a drink, and then Freya was gone.

Great, they hadn't even lifted off yet and he already had an "episode," fainting like some ditzy girl for no apparent reason. He was sure Freya was most impressed. He closed his eyes and let his head hit the wall behind him with a weary thump. He would have to explain himself later, but for now he let his mind drift off.

After a while the ship rattled to life, jarring him awake, and right then Freya returned with a peculiar refreshment: fruit juice in tiny cardboard boxes, complete with straws.

"Juice comes in boxes now?"

"I know; I almost didn't know what to make of it. I found a whole crate of them in the stores below deck. The crew said we could have some."

"Weird."

She sat down and shared a biscuit with him. "Here, found something to eat, as well. A little nourishment will probably perk you up."

He accepted the snack with a wan smile. *'She's quick… Freya's always been smart like that.'* They

nibbled on biscuits and sipped juice while the ship took off, its rudder pipes dumping billowy black smoke over the shrinking Alexandria. Soon Zidane was reminiscing, not only over the old castle town, but also over all the steps he had taken to get there. He remembered the bumps and scrapes, big and small, and everyone who helped their band along the way, and who was often there at the end of the day to give him a firm word and a healing hand… *'I don't know how I would have made it without her, sometimes.'*

"Thanks… for taking care of me."

Freya reeled from the unprompted line. "I just went to get you some juice and a biscuit. It was no great hardship."

"Heh, no, I mean, for all those other times, on the road and stuff. I don't think I ever really thanked you for that. It meant a lot to me."

She didn't say anything on her behalf, but merely gave him a pat on the back (although she wasn't quick to pull her hand away, fingers tangling in the scruff of his ponytail. She was especially *fascinated* with his hair today, and he wondered if his shampoo was really that attractive to Burmecians.) "Hmm. Speaking of that, feeling better?"

He nodded. “Yeah, loads. I don’t know what came over me earlier.”

Her voice tinkled with a joke. “Cold feet, perhaps?”

Zidane coughed up a laugh. “Hah, what, me? Naw…”

He slurped the last of his juice while Freya stuck him with a critical look. Zidane carefully ignored it, until she spoke up. “Well?”

“Hmm?”

“What happened, then?”

‘*Damn*.’ “I told ya, I’m just tired.”

“God’s blood, Zidane, if you can’t be honest with me now, why am I here?!” Freya railed, exasperated.

Zidane winced—she had a right to be angry, he supposed. “Sorry. It’s nothing serious. I just didn’t want to upset you, okay?”

“That is the lousiest salvo I’ve heard in years. When has trying to hide these things *ever* made anything better?”

He held up a finger to raise a point, but before the first syllable could pass she warned, “If the next word out of your mouth isn’t ‘never’ I’m going to toss you overboard.”

Zidane’s mouth snapped shut, and he crossed his arms and tapped his foot grumpily. The only thing he hated worse than being weak was being forced to admit it. “Okay, fine, but you’re not gonna want to hear it. It’s stupid.”

“I assure you I will not be surprised,” she said flatly.

“Well, did I, uh…” He slouched, rubbed his nose and said in a quiet rush, “Maybe mention I haven’t ate or slept in the past two nights or so?”

Unfortunately his haste did not hamper her hearing, much less her outrage. “For goodness sake, why not?!”

“I was distracted, okay??”

“Oh, not that nonsense again. Honestly, by what?”

‘Staying up too late, thinking too hard about where I’m going with my life. Heh, if Vivi caught me

doing that I bet he'd have something to say.…I wish Vivi were here.' "…Nothing."

He thought he saw one of her ears shift speculatively beneath her helmet. "You don't mean 'distracted.' You were depressed."

Sometimes he wondered if Freya had the ability to read minds. "Not exactly," he hedged. "Just anxious."

"Why?"

Why? Why did he have to spill his guts just because she asked? Why did that look of hers always—why did Freya always make him so… honest? He sighed. "It's hard, letting go of a sure thing… I never thought I'd have that problem. I used to go wherever I wanted; do whatever I wanted…"

"Are you afraid to settle?"

He sputtered, offended by the psychoanalysis. "Hey, I'm not *scared*." He scratched his head, fishing for the right word. "Maybe I'm really… reluctant."

Freya sat back, considering him while watching the clouds wipe the horizon into an oblivious shade of blue. Eventually she said, "It was difficult for me

to leave, as well. I had to say goodbye to many things I took for granted. I regret nothing, though. I am glad I left before I grew too… complacent."

"Complacent, huh…?" Zidane wondered what that meant for Fratley. She must have been avoiding him for a reason. "Never did remember, did he?"

Her eyes twitched darkly, but then closed with resigned poise. "No, but I have made my peace with that. I am grateful, really. It made my decision easier."

"…Oh." *'So, it didn't work out. She was chasing him forever, too. It must have really been hard. I wish she had told me from the start.'* He wasn't sure whether to offer condolences or not; he couldn't imagine being in Freya's position. What if Dagger had forgotten all about him? Would that be a blessing or a curse, considering where he was now? He didn't think he could stand the heartbreak, either way.

Freya thankfully moved on before he was compelled to stick his foot in his mouth. "I had heard bits and pieces from the others, about what happened after the Iifa Tree. They say you nearly died back in the Black Mage Village."

Zidane rolled his shoulders and shuffled from one tender subject to another. “Yeah, it was a little rough. It’s been like a year since then, though. I thought I’d be over it by now.”

“Never quite recovered?”

“Not exactly. Mikoto said it might take a long time. She also said I shoulda died like six times over.” He laughed at his luck, tail wagging over his head with a flourish. “Hah, like I haven’t heard that before! Nothing can take down Zidane the Great!”

She prodded his ribs with her claws, making him wiggle out of sorts. “Hmph, being a fool doesn’t make you invincible.”

“Aww, you’re always puttin’ me down.” He rubbed his side and mellowed. “But yeah, I guess I should take it easy for a while.”

“That’s a shame…” Freya said airily, a funny quirk to her lips. “I was ready to play with you some more, too.”

Zidane cringed, covering his head. “You can’t eat my hair again!”

“Ahaha, no, you simpleton.” She sat up, daintily crossed her legs and lowered an affected leer. “I was

thinking of something a little more *risqué*."

"Oh—whaaaaat?" It took a second for her sultry tone to seep through his skull, but once her suggestion reached his brain, all other senses jumped overboard. He pounced on Freya's lap, rejuvenated by the proposal. "Okay, I'm better now! Let's play."

She fell back and kicked out her feet, blown over with laughter. "Ouf! Haha, *gods*, I should have known better than to joke about that! Your face is priceless."

"Hey hey hey!" Zidane blustered, hurt by her teasing. He balanced on his knees, hands squared on her shoulders, and pouted to her face. "If you wanna play hard-to-get, that's cool, but don't yank my chain, here! Either it's on or it's not."

"Oh, so it's okay for you to flirt and tease girls all day long, but it's not okay when a girl does it to you? I see your double standard, Tribal," she said with scathing relish.

Zidane's cheeks burned with the accusation. '*How dare her…!*' Before he could turn the argument around, however, Freya turned him around literally. She seized him by the middle and wrapped him up in the sleeves of her coat, his back pressed to

her breast. “I’ll show you what’s on,” she growled, and once his arms were bound too tightly to effectively escape, she resumed her insidious design: grooming his hair with her tongue.

“Gah! Leggo!”

“Mwahaha, got you again. You are too easy.”

“You—crazy—psycho-rat! This isn’t fair!”

“Life is not fair, ’m ’fraid. Now hold still, my delicious morsel.”

“Geez, this is sick. You can’t bait me like that!”

A sardonic puff glanced his ear. “Please, it wouldn’t be *baiting* if you wouldn’t fall for it like an obsessed puppy! Honestly, Zidane, I think your preoccupation with sex is unhealthy.”

“Hey, sex is like gil; you can never have too much.”

“Oh yes, that’s an upstanding maxim to live by: greed *and* debauchery. It suits you perfectly.” Before he could fire back she expounded, “I’m just saying the whole exercise seems frivolous. What’s the big deal about sex, anyway? All that build-up and tension, blown away in two minutes. Sounds like an exquisite waste of time and effort.”

Zidane gaped, first at her blunt manner and then at her implication. “Two minutes?! Woman, who’s been bedding you?”

“You’ll call me *lady*, and I don’t think that particular is any of your business!” she asserted stuffily. She let her grip slacken, holding her chin up and out of the way as she disavowed the entire discussion. “How gauche. Why in the world are we talking about this, anyway?”

Zidane took the opportunity to slide out of her lap and to his feet. “You brought it up! But you make a good point: Why are we talking…” He took her hand and winked, a notion simmering in his belly that wouldn’t be quenched with petty head games. “…When we could be doing?”

Not mistaking his intentions, the dragon knight tensed indignantly. “By the gods we’re not to be doing what you think we’re about to be doing…!” She had one foot and elbow braced against the bench as if to spring out of reach; yet the way the stiff hairs around her nose flared like panther whiskers while she glared at him through hard jade eyes… it only fueled his perverse whim. He’d never seen a more inviting challenge in his life, and Zidane had to take it, all the gods be damned.

“Oh yeah, you and me, right now.” He started to pull her up and away, but she held to the bench. “Zidane…! You can’t just proposition me like this!”

He whirled on her, tail swishing impatiently. “And what the *hell* were you suggesting like a minute ago? Double standards work both ways, you know! I’m not kiddin’ around.”

Freya narrowed a look between furious and sadistic, and in that fleeting window Zidane wondered if this was such a good idea, after all. She then accepted his hand and said with calculated resolve, “Fine, let’s go.”

‘Whoa, she actually said yes!’ Zidane didn’t get much chance to marvel at her acquiescence before she grabbed his shoulder and steered him down the nearest stairwell, uttering grimly, “If you’re such a gods given sexpert, then show me how it’s done. And so help me, I better be impressed, or you’ll be bedding the rest of this flight in the boiler room.”

“Awesome, I’ve always wanted to try angry sex,” he remarked, as if he were talking about finding a ten gil piece on the ground, and Freya cuffed him upside the head.

“Shut up, before I change my mind.”

“Yes ma’am!” he chirped, strangely honored and intimidated at once.

They found a long corridor below deck that led to the back of the ship, and they walked the rest of the way in bated silence. Usually a few private cabins were allotted for passengers on these ocean-going flights, and it wouldn’t be difficult to find a vacant one. Even if their door was a mile away, though, the trek still wouldn’t be long enough for Zidane to figure out what Freya was thinking.

It was too hard to believe… He was a sexy guy (naturally!) but up until now Freya seemed absolutely impervious to his charms. As far as he knew, she was never interested, and he was never really trying to lay her, despite all his games. Besides, he hadn’t forgotten how fiercely she shot him down the day they first met (*“No. Gods in heaven, no. Gods in* hell *no. Please grow up and try again. On someone else.”*) Then there was that incident with the grand dragons… Okay, so she was probably pissed about the dragons there.

Still, what if that night at Conde Petie wasn’t some drunken misconception—what if she really did dig him? If so, why was she acting so mad about it? Was she still going to be all over him once the damn

shampoo wore off? Why did this feel right in all the wrong places? Maybe he was thinking too hard. Maybe she was just curious? He certainly had been, ever since that day he spied her in the bath—and she didn't kill him for that either, which still puzzled him. Not even Freya was *that* magnanimous, right? At this rate, Zidane was going to have to accept that he would never understand women.

It didn't matter, really. Maybe being free to do this was the only point of it all, and if he had to prove himself one more time to make that point, he was ready.

"I can't believe I'm agreeing to this," she complemented his thoughts.

Trying to be smooth about it, he gave one of those smart retorts that only made sense when he considered it later. "I can't believe we haven't done this sooner."

She sniffed, not to be handled like some ordinary fare. "You think I'm that easy?"

He risked a sidelong glance under the brim of her helm, and when he caught her sly smirk, the warm, sagacious crinkle around her brow and the cool, indomitable glint in her eye, that's when Zidane

knew it: he had a precious gem in his hands, a ruby whose fire couldn’t be cut or cracked. That’s when he knew Baku was dead wrong, and Zidane couldn’t hide a proud, admiring grin. “Not at all… That’s what I like about you.”

He must have said something right, because she hooked one hand behind his back and around the coils of his belt, the titillating touch keeping him close as she picked up their pace. A room along the hull was left open, and with as little ceremony as possible they bustled inside and bolted the door. The lodging was plainly adequate, lightly dusted and furnished with a squat, boxy table and a single bunk beneath a generous porthole. Afternoon was already setting into evening, and motes wafted and glimmered through an oblique shaft of sunlight that painted the stripped wooden panels dirty gold.

Freya didn’t delay, tossing her helmet and coat into the corner with her spear (she had apparently staked this room out beforehand, and Zidane had to credit her preparedness.) He likewise threw his daggers aside, and was about to pull his shirt over his head when he was reeled in by the tail, like a fish on a line. The shock made him yelp and stagger.

Zidane didn’t like having his tail pulled. People would presume that since it could hold his weight and manipulate small objects, it could withstand some rough hands, but it was actually a much more sensitive limb than its functions implied. While pulling his tail wasn’t kick-in-the-jewels uncomfortable, it did fray his nerves and tug on his nethers in a way that bordered on molestation (and Zidane would only be molested on *his* terms, preferably by a lady friend.) There were a few, very particular exceptions that very few met, and Dagger was never that bold in the bedroom, so the rule was simply reduced to, “no touching.”

“Hey!” He rubbed his hindquarters and put up a hurt front, but Freya’s defiant grin only spelled trouble. She stole him back, one hand around his waist and pressing his side into her blouse while the other squeezed his tail at the base, sending an astringent shiver from head to toes. “Ah-a-ahh…! Freya!”

She tugged and rubbed the coarse fur with increasing zest, going with the grain and reveling in his writhing, strangled little complaints. Each stroke was like stoking a furnace, stirring up fiery sediment within, and he was about to melt at her feet. Perhaps it was only fueled by anticipation, but at the moment

he couldn’t recall the last time pulling his tail hurt that good and hot. “F-Freya! Don’t… pull it… yeah… h-harder, oh—yeah…” He was acutely aware of the swelling in his pants, rushing him to a premature finish, but he couldn’t help himself. *‘I’m getting hard, gods, oh… What am I doing?? She’s getting one over me already!’*

He felt her shake with a low chuckle. “Don’t tell me I’m about to wear you out already.”

Zidane broke away with another shudder, tempering his breathing and tucking his tail behind his ankle. “Hell no, I’m just getting started!” He had to be careful. If he was too quick, he was going to blow it—in a bad way, that is, and the last thing he wanted to do was disappoint her. He spotted an incentive on the table: an egg-shaped alarm clock, which he demonstratively turned to face the bed. “Okay, let’s go. Two minutes, my ass.”

Freya looked ready to laugh him out of the room. “Oh my gods, you can’t be seri—aaaah!” He didn’t let her finish her thought, marching over, hoisting her over his shoulder and flipping her wholly onto the berth. She bounced once off the springy mat before Zidane jumped on after her, bringing his lusty enthusiasm to bear on the Burmecian.

“Zida—mmph!” It took a minute of fast, misguided fumbling to match each other’s rhythm, but they eventually settled on a slower cadence. He bowed into her open arms, sampling every flavor of her kiss with a sensual drawl (his immediate observation was that she tasted like fruit juice.) Hands glided under linen and over fur and skin, and shirt and blouse sailed over the side of the bunk in a unanimous lump. Once revealed, Zidane had to take a moment to appreciate what was at hand—or in hand, rather. “Ah, boobies.”

Freya fell back into the covers and snorted. “Ahaha, you know how to charm a lady to bed, don’t you?”

“Oh I can spout some classically charming bullshit, if you really wanna hear it! I know all the lines from those cheesy romances. I think you’d rather cut to the chase, eh?”

“How amorous of you. I am touched.”

“You can say that again…” He sat up and avidly groped her breasts, watching them jiggle as she cracked with laughter. “Ah, boobies.”

“Zidane!!”

“Okay, okay, back to business.” He planted a row of kisses down her neck and muttered salaciously, “Now, where were we…?”

“Mmm, stalling is cheating…” Freya murmured as her hands roved his ribs and back, sewing goose bumps all the way down his spine.

“Oh really? How’s this for fair play…?” He moved down her body, picking the string of her breeches like a locked chest while his tongue ran a circuit around her navel, brushing the cinereous hairs over the muscular contours of her hips. She granted permission with a tickled hum, lifting each leg to give away pants and panties, and his breath tripped in his throat when he beheld her nude form.

Even the idealized image burned into his impressionable male mind couldn’t compare to reality, up-close and personal, and Freya made a much fairer sight splayed within his reach on a firm bed than she did at a distance in the bath. Her body was a testament to the lean, lithe power and grace of the world’s best dragon knight, with perfectly trimmed curves and strong thighs. Her flesh was fettled and sturdy at the joints, yet soft and yielding at all the sweet spots, with a fine coat of mouse-lace all over. Zidane’s fingers skimmed the gradient of

lush, snowy fur from belly to inner thigh, infatuated with the downy texture, and there was a hungry twitch in his loins.

“Damn…” he whispered appreciatively.

Freya blinked widely at him, knees drawing closed and lips parting slightly with concern. “What’s wrong?”

He was discomfited to see her shrink away like that, almost fearfully, and her far-away words struck him. (*“I know how unseemly Burmecians appear to other races.”*) He shook his head, dispelling her rising doubt. “Nothing, you’re just… incredible.”

She reclined on her elbows with a relieved smirk, slender ears turned forward. “Flattery is cheating, too.”

He grinned rapaciously and prowled between her legs. “Oh no, *this* is cheating.” He dove in headfirst, nose buried in her plumy mons while he ravished her with his tongue. She didn’t taste like fruit juice anymore—salty but definitely satisfying. Freya’s tail slapped his side and she kicked the air in a wild reflex, disarmed but definitely not resisting. “Oh-!”

She sang a discordant ditty that must have been approval in rat-speak while he lapped up the nectar

of her arousal, a pulse echoing in his groin at her every ragged moan. Zidane had planned some deep spelunking, but Freya abruptly sat up at the peak of her tune and dragged her claws across his back, searing a trail through the sheen of fresh sweat.

“Ahh!” Zidane pulled up and shot her a bewildered look, wondering whether he had screwed up or just discovered an unexpected kink. “Stop, stop…” she panted, her face flushed with pent-up desire, and her design grew clear once she pushed him backwards and untied his belt.

“Umm…” he mumbled lamely, submitting to this twist. He helped her pull his trousers off so that they were naked together, and his freed erection throbbed gratefully. There was a peculiar twist to her brow as she paused to study his member, appraising it perhaps (okay, it wasn’t as big as he would boast, but he liked to think he was better than average—not that he spent enough time looking at other guys to know how long ‘average’ was.) She then swooped down without comment, taking him in her mouth.

“Ah-ah-ah! Oh, *shit*, geez…” The tips of her ears tickled his belly, and he could hardly hear himself over his drumming heart. Zidane gulped and struggled to relax, letting her play with him. Her

long muzzle fit him easily, teeth held off with sedulous restraint, and once she sealed a grip and started sucking everything blurred into icy-hot pleasure. All he could focus on was the kneading suction and breathing, and the latter was a faltering effort—he couldn’t find his own tail if someone asked him for it. Once again Zidane wondered where Freya learned such a thing, and he vowed right there never to underestimate her again.

“Oh, uh… oh… o-oh… Freya, ah, Freya please,” he mewled and sagged backwards, arms made of rubber and fingers clenching the edge of the bunk—which barely fit two people as it was. *‘Gods I hope I don’t fall off this thing,’* he thought deliriously. Freya’s wet, raspy tongue crested his leaking glans, inducing an embarrassing wail, and his tail whipped the skirt of the bed in a tantrum. “I’m gonna—ah—ah—Freya!!” *‘Not yet!’*

He jerked up and pushed her off before he—he couldn’t take it anymore. She flashed him a look of disoriented alarm, one hand rising to wipe the dribble from her chin, but he tackled her to the mat with a deep, heavy kiss before she could recover. They were getting better at it, learning how to exploit all the voluptuous nooks and ridges of each

other’s mouths, and soon they were sharing eager, feverish moans.

“I… I want, I…” Freya stammered between his lips, and Zidane was left guessing because he couldn’t spare the breath to ask. He suckled her collarbone, growling and biting ravenously through the fur, and in response she bent over and nipped his neck. His left hand cupped the ample curve of her breast while the other arm yoked her to the bed, Zidane’s more simian urges assuming dominance. Her willowy figure bucked and seethed beneath him as she clamped down harder, the incisors bound to leave marks to match his scratches, and for an absurd minute they looked like a pair of beasts wrestling for the kill. She was feral and ready and he was about to go mad—he couldn’t wait any longer.

Once he dipped inside her, Freya seemed to answer her own wanting question, her hips climbing to embrace him. “Oh—right bloody—*yes*…”

“*Yeah*,” he concurred, surprising himself with his gravelly voice. He started to gain momentum and lose control, and in return Freya’s demands grew guttural and frantic.

“Faster… oh harder, yes faster—harder, *harder* __”

“Uh… ah… can’t… can’t get any harder…!”

They dropped their stunted conversation and lost one another to the friction, rising and thrusting into the taut, undulating heat. He tried to draw out the feeling of it, bobbing and weaving intricately, but she felt so tight and slick he nearly lost his grip, tail flailing in rapt abandon. Freya’s tail, meanwhile, was caught between their heaving bodies, and Zidane had to wrap it in his fist before the errant limb smacked him in the face. She flinched and irritably flicked her ears when the sweat flew off his brow and into her eyes, and the bunk rattled so fiercely under all the rocking and bouncing that he wasn’t sure it would outlast their gymnastics, and worst of all he forgot his routine, the one that worked like a cinch on all his other lays. Nothing was coming together right and Freya was making noises that were definitely more becoming of mice than ladies, and it would have all been hysterical if he weren’t enthralled in the best sex he’s had in years, his skin teeming with the keen ache of ecstasy.

“Oh gods, gods, *gods*—!” she gasped, and Zidane came before Freya could punctuate her misbegotten epithet, quaking with the gushing release. “*Damnit…!*”

She followed him on one loud, long, quivering note, her caged convulsions racking him in an aftershock. They fell together, the berth giving one last squeak in protest.

They lay forever in a sticky, dissolute mess, awkwardly sublime, languishing in sated breath and glued together with sweat, saliva and fluids Zidane couldn't scientifically name. He finally withdrew with a weary grunt and settled back down in the crook of her arm, feeling ravaged. Freya said nothing all the while, stretching over the covers and watching him through drowsy eyelashes with a strangely humored expression.

At length he had to ask, eyebrows raised enquiringly, "So… impressed?"

"Hmm." Freya craned a look to the egg-clock and declared with blithe indifference, "Well, I suppose five minutes is better than two."

"'s all about the timing."

"You make it sound like it's an art form, like ballet."

He countered with a surly thump of his tail, "Can be."

“Cheeky, cheeky monkey…” she crooned and lightly trailed her knuckles down his bare flank, about to give him gooseflesh all over again. Freya studied him with smouldering, tactile interest, fingers tracing odd scars and visible ribs. “You are such a scrawny thing…” She lingered on the thin red lines running from his buttocks to shoulder blades, murmuring sympathetically, “Hmm, sorry for that.”

“Why, did it bleed?”

“A little.”

“Ah. No problem, it was kinda hot.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Is there *anything* you don’t find erotic?”

“Frog legs—or anything Quina cooks. Or just Quina in general.”

She roused a quaintly amused grin. “You are awful.”

Zidane nestled into her affection with a crude smile, sliding an arm around her middle. “You know you liked it.”

“Hmph. It’s a good thing you are easy on the eyes—that’s all I’m going to say.”

“Aww, I’m not all *that* bad, am I?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she hummed, leaving it at that, and the pair indulged in lazy repose while a spot of sunlight slowly scaled the bulkhead. In a more romantic setting, the ship’s muffled engines would sound like waterfalls and all the swirling specks of dust would look like golden fireflies, but nothing here felt romantic. Just… warm, familiar.

Zidane began to draw idle swirls in the fur on her belly while he mused, *‘Wow… I just laid Freya. I’ve never had a Burmecian before—that was some sweet pussy. Or is it sweet mousy? I still can’t believe she let me.…Now what?’* He didn’t know how he should feel. Proud, ashamed, satisfied? He certainly slaked his curiosity. Wasn’t this the part where they got up, got dressed and pretended nothing ever happened? Maybe there was something he was supposed to be doing, but laying against her soft hide, unabashedly nude and comfortable, he couldn’t imagine anywhere else he wanted to be.

Although… maybe now that all that *tension* was out of the way, it was time to have a little heart-to-heart.

“Hey, Freya…”

“Hmm?”

“That uh, that thing we just did there—that was pretty awesome, but… Gee, how do I say this…?”

“Just spit it out,” she calmly ordered.

“Well, this is all awfully… forward of you, don’t you think?”

“Says the scoundrel *after* the act. Don’t tell me you’ve ever turned down a girl for being too *forward* with you.”

“No way!” he rebounded, his lecherous pride at stake. “It’s just not like you.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I dunno. It’s really hot, is what it is, but I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around it. I thought you didn’t like me—you know, like *that*.”

“Oh, Zidane…” she sighed, condescending and wistful at once. “What can I say? I’m not falling for you, if that’s what you want to hear.”

“…Oh.” What was he, disappointed? Why? He knew Freya wasn’t looking for another boyfriend, right? Did he not want to feel used? That never bothered him before. A good round of sex was just

another good round of sex, to him. He swallowed and quickly recovered, “Um, yeah, of course not, right? Heh, that would be weird. I mean, I don’t want you to feel obligated or nothin’. We’re just having fun, right?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she agreed, her hand resting near the small of his back as she took him in to cuddle. He sank into the cushion of her breast and listened to the tranquil throb of her heart, his own irked by a feeling he couldn’t identify.

Zidane would never be able to understand women, but he knew enough about chicks (and his own tumultuous relationships) to understand that no matter how she covered it up, Freya must have still had some feelings for Fratley, for good or for ill. Maybe he wanted to be sure he wasn’t that “after-breakup guy,” the one getting used to help a girl get over some unfortunate loser. Normally he wouldn’t mind filling that role for some sleazy girl off the street (until some angry ex-boyfriends came knocking for vengeance—then again, nah, he had fun beating up those guys, too.) This was *Freya*, though, and for all that they’ve been through together, he hated to watch her walk that slippery path of regret.

It was a little late for scruples, but if there was anything he could do to ease her pain (besides sex, which was already given), he wanted to be there for her. More than anything, though, he wanted to start being honest—for real this time, about everything. Freya at least deserved that.

Zidane started over. “I think what I’m trying to say is… If you’re looking for someone to replace something you lost, I can’t be that guy.”

She seemed to grind to a stop, her tail flicking once and then falling still. He couldn’t even discern the casual rise and fall of her chest, and before either of them suffocated in the dragging silence Zidane hurried to placate, “But, I mean…! If you’re looking for a good time and someone to help you forget for a while, I am definitely down for that.”

After a while he felt her breath whisking over his head, her voice weak and damp. “Damnit, Zidane, when did you get to be so…?”

“Huh?”

“…Nothing,” she amended, something oddly serene in her tone. “Just shut up and hold me.”

He complied, sifting his hand through the pearly silk of her hair and enjoying her cozy curves and

soft fur against his skin. *‘Man, forget Burmecians—any guy is lucky to get with this. Is she ever going to realize how gorgeous she is?’*

Freya nuzzled him again, tip of her snout tousling his hair while one hand got a devious grip on his tail. “Gods, you smell so good…”

He snickered. Maybe he didn’t have to ask. Maybe—just maybe—everything was going to be all right. “Geez, you’re still up to that? I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted.”

“Go to sleep, then.” She caressed the side of his face, lulling him to that end. “I’ve got you.”

“Got my back, huh? Just like old times.”

“We’re not that old yet, whelp.”

“Heheh.”

He closed his eyes and drank in the scent of her shoulder, something redolent of old canvas tents and morning tea. At times—long before he met Dagger or learned about his birthplace or anything grand like that—the closest thing he had to home was traveling with her. Maybe Freya wasn’t falling for him—so she said—but… he could lie with her

forever. And if they never found Paradise that would be just fine; he felt like he was already there.

"…Hmm."

"Hmm?" she echoed sleepily.

'I think I'm flying and I can't get up. "…home."

"Hmm," Freya couldn't say it better, herself. They were flying home, to Gaia.

Zidane fell asleep and didn't wake up until they arrived.

…And they had many crazy adventures thereafter. The End.

COMMENCE WANK / DVD COMMENTARY (click away while you still can):

Now there was a challenge: writing a pairing not even I thought would work, at first. It defies all logic, reason and canon—but like the good lady told Spock, whoever said the human race was logical?

…Geebus, I'm a nerd.

I've always been wishy-washy about Zidane/Freya, my mind not quite connecting to my heart's desire (three years ago I drew a pretty hilarious piece of porn for the pair that I can't post anywhere, though I can still look in my "definitely not porn" folder and chuckle wistfully now and then.) Unfortunately I had a sticky, immutable thing called *canon* in the way, and even though I find Fratley and Garnet pretty boring to this day (sorry Crimson! "Brick by Brick" is still hella awesome, keep up the good work), I never had the heart (much less a good reason) to interfere with tru luff.

So, in a totally weird and abstract way this fic was like a lover to me, in the same way "Prince of Thieves" was like my baby (that fic took exactly nine months to write. Fun fact.) Something like a real-life relationship, things hit a few bumps, doubts and regrets along the way (as some of you know), but it ended up being worthwhile. It's funny, because as someone pointed out this WAS a one-shot, and then… what can I say? It was one thing after another. It was supposed to be a bunch of drabbles, just stretching my writing muscles, y'know? I didn't intend to jog a marathon.

And so, for making it to the end, I present a BONUS: brought to you once again by the folks at

#icybrian.

Myshu: Oh hey CHAT, spot me here
Myshu: I need as many euphenisms for sex as y'all can think of
Myshu: (for a fic y'see)
DK: riding the bologna pony
DK: tripping the light fantastic
DK: making the beast with two backs
DK: schtupping
DK: digging for gold
DK: pressin' mattress
DK: takin' dick drive to pussy lane
DK: hiding the salami
DK: getting to know one another
Mozz: poundit poundit poundit poundit
Alek: Wanging the Chung
DK: having a wet meat party
Mozz: Pink Plains Driftin'
DK: traversing the chunnel
Alek: Hopping on the good foot and doing the bad thing
bionicfen: VERBING THE NOUN
Alek: Harry Potter-ing your Chamber of Secrets
DK: performing the slick skin symphony
AgentTon: Stabbin the Sarlacc pit
DK: crossing the spoobicon

Mozz: spoogicon
Alek: boobicon
DK: flesh pretzel
DK: engaging in vigorous carnal discourse
Alek: And, uh, Pedro.
Alek: Pedro?
Alek: Yes ma’am. Pedro.
Mozz: you’ve seen Varsity Blues too, eh Alek
DK: parting the curtain
*** DK STILL going**
AgentTon: Parting the red sea
Alek: Around the World in 80 Seconds
Alek: Journying to the Center of the Earth
DK: taking the Big Whale to the Moon
DK: Killing Tellah
DK: Climing Mt. Ordeals
Mozz: reviving the power of the ORBS
Mozz: junctioning the GF
Alek: Impaling Aeris
L_Culleany: Summoning Odin
Mozz: Listening To My Story.
DK: Filling her Journey with Laughter
Alek: HA HA HA HA HA.
Mozz: HA HA HA HA
bionicfen: Effing the Bee
L_Culleany: Finding the Seagull
DK: Satisfying Leblanc

L_Culleany: Plundering the Phoenix Cave
DK: Feeding Cid some Fish
Mozz: Mastering the Job System
bionicfen: Being Captain Basch von Rosenburgh
Alek: Playing the Golden Saucer
DK: Exploring Burmecia
L_Culleany: Finding the Pink Tail
Mozz: we would also have accepted Fighting The Pink Puff
AgentTon: Puff puff~
Alek: Finding the Huge Materia
DK: Giving the Slab to Dr. Unne
DK: Waking the Elven Prince
DK: Exploring the Marsh Cave (ewwwwww)
Mozz: Giving Matoya the Crystal
Alek: Banging the Odine Bangle
Alek: Playing Bang a Banga
Myshu: Chocobang Hot & Cold
AgentTon: Banging the drum slowly.
AgentTon: Bridge Over the River Thigh.
DK: Putting Cloud in a Wheelchair
Mozz: hahahahahahahaha
*** Myshu spittake**

(This went on at a steady clip for another hour, but I can’t post it all here or it would eclipse the fic.)

All that said, I had tons of fun writing, and I have everyone to thank—readers, reviewers and friends—for making it rewarding as well. You guys are the best!

Now I swear to dog, I hope nobody *learned* anything from all this, or I'll have to change the summary.

~the neiphiti dragon

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Copyright Information	2
Table of Contents	3
Summary	4
1. The Matron	5
2. The Cold	15
3. Foot Rubs	24
4. Thunder's Fever	42
5. The Ribbon	64
6. Random Encounters	86
7. The Bath	126
8. Self Esteem	137
9. Alcohol and Tail	151
10. Pillow Talk	177
11. Memory Lane	198
12. Missing Half	236
13. Paradise	255

14. Flying 297